

CEMETERY DANCE



SPRING 1991 / Volume Three / Issue Two

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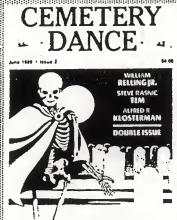
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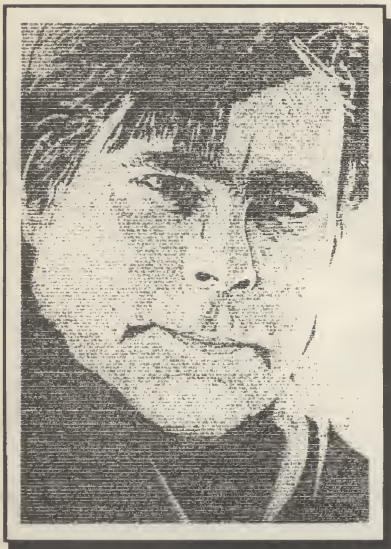
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WORDS FROM THE EDITOR

RICHARD T. CHIZMAR

CEMETERY DANCE #8 -- Welcome back to another issue of *Cemetery Dance*, the magazine of dark mystery & horror fiction, non-fiction features, columns, interviews, news and reviews. If you have picked us up from a bookstore and are reading us for the first time . . . enjoy this Spring Issue. We hope you are impressed enough to subscribe or keep an eye out for the Summer Edition, arriving at bookstores at the end of July.

As usual, we have some excellent features in store for you this time around. Let's begin with the non-fiction features. This issue, we introduce *Cemetery Dance's* newest Contributing Editors -- Tyson Blue and Bob Morrish. Tyson's column, "Needful Kings & Other Things" will provide the inside scoop, news, and reviews on Stephen King and other high profile authors. With the demise of the wonderful *Castle Rock*, this column will be a don't-miss feature for King fans. Bob will be spearheading a new column, entitled "Spotlight on Publishing." He'll be conducting interviews with the top specialty publishers in the business, beginning with Dark Harvest's Paul Mikol, and following with Mark Ziesing, Pulphouse Publishing, Charnel House, Maclay & Associates, and many others.

On to the regulars . . . Ed Gorman contributes a wonderful "Gormania" feature, while Matthew Costello follows with the second installment of his commentary column, "Nightmare Alley." T. Liam McDonald continues his stunning interview series with the second of two lengthy conversations with Peter Straub, while Joseph Citro talks with genre reviewer Richard Weilgosh. Ed Bryant and Lori Perkins both return this issue with more insightful book reviews and Paul Sammon returns with the third installment of his film column, "Rough Cuts." And as usual, a round of applause for *CD's* regular cover artist, Charles Lang, for his latest chilling masterpiece.

On the fiction side . . . Look for short stories of the darkest order from Gary Brandner, Melanie Tem, John Maclay, Tom Elliott, S.K. Epperson, William Relling Jr. & Joseph Coulson. And novellas from award-winner Nancy Collins and newcomer Gene Michael Higney!

This issue marks the last installment of Joe Citro's "People In The Shadows" column. Joe's career is demanding so much energy that he no longer has the time necessary to continue the wonderful feature. I wanted to take a moment to publicly thank Joe for his professionalism, enthusiasm, and sincere interest in *Cemetery Dance*. It's been a pleasure to work with Joe, and an honor to call him a friend. Thanks, buddy, we'll miss you.

Please allow me to briefly answer one of the questions we've been asked several times recently. Regarding our publication schedule: we are a quarterly publication, releasing issues at the end of January, April, July, and October. "Released" means retail copies are shipped at the end of that month. We mail subscriber copies one week early (via bulk rate) because we realize that many times the postal system is a slow moving creature.

A FINAL REMINDER: *COLD BLOOD: New Tales of Mystery & Horror* is now available! I edited this hardcover anthology for Ziesing Books and think it is a wonderful cross-genre showcase -- the best of horror, suspense, mystery and crime from the field's best authors. The book has been published as both a Trade and Limited hardcover. Please turn to the back cover of this issue for ordering and price information.

Enough for this time. Please remember . . . Ingram Periodicals is *Cemetery Dance's* bookstore distributor. If you frequent a chain or independent book store, please ask the manager to order *Cemetery Dance* for your area. Now turn up the lights, flip the page, take my hand, and start the dance . . .

MAMA'S LITTLE SOLDIER

JOSEPH COULSON & WILLIAM RELLING JR.

JOSEPH COULSON & WILLIAM RELLING JR. prove -- with the following selection -- to be a winning combination. Joe Coulson, a Hermosa Beach resident, is the author of three books of poetry. "Mama's Little Soldier" is his first published short story. Bill Relling is no stranger to *Cemetery Dance* readers. He was the featured author in *CD#2*, and this is his fifth appearance in the magazine (he also collaborated with Richard Christian Matheson in issue five). Relling says: "Joe and I are working together on a couple of other stories. He's more of a SF fan than a horror fan, but I'm winning him over slowly." Let's hope so.

Saigon: 1973

The whores find it amusing that I never take off all my clothes.

Tonight's is a case in point. I meet her at a bar across the city from the hospital. She takes me to a third-story room in a residence hotel nearby. The room is permeated with odors: stale perspiration mixed with the bilious, back-of-the-throat tang of sexual effluvia. And another smell I've found to be uniquely Vietnamese: the greasy, days-old scent of dog-flesh having been prepared for someone's meal. The cooked meat of no other animal smells quite like that of *canis familiaris*. Believe me.

There is a lamp on a rattan night table next to the sagging bed. She switches on the lamp, and I see that the table and the bed are the only pieces of furniture in the room. An ancient ceiling fan swishes and thups, its blades rhythmically cutting the air. The breeze from the fan does little to ameliorate the heat in the room.

"Put your clothes on de floor, Joe," she says. "Dey be all right dere." Her accent has a vague coloration: French, I believe. She may be older than I guessed her to be when I was appraising her at the bar. It's possible she was a child at the time the French still occupied her country, nearly two decades ago. Perhaps she is as old as thirty. That would make her a survivor.

How envious she must be to her friends. There are few thirty-year-old whores in Saigon -- or anywhere in Vietnam. Most of them are half that age or younger. The rest are dying or dead.

She undresses: hot pants, halter top, spike heels.

Her uniform. Her skin is sallow, the color of chicken fat. Jaundice. There is little flesh on her bones. She is as flat-chested as a teenaged boy. The epidermis stretches tight across her rib cage. I notice the needle marks at the crooks of her arms.

She sits down on the edge of the bed. I stand before her in my undershorts and t-shirt. She gestures to me. "You not get all de way naked, Joe?" she says. She smiles, her eyes twinkling with bemusement and condescension.

I shake my head.

She shrugs, then lies back on the bed. Settling herself comfortably, she spreads her legs. "C'mon," she coos. "Me horny. Me so horny." She places a hand atop her secret place. Massages herself. Moans.

I hold open my hand. "Can you help me with this, please?"

She raises herself to see what I'm holding. She scowls, as if insulted. "Me clean," she snaps. "No V.D. Me go to clinic every week . . ."

Pressing her lips into a pout, she sits up on the bed. She takes the silver case from me and lifts the condom from the clear, slippery fluid. I step closer to the bed. She reaches between the folds of my shorts. I am erect. She unrolls the wet prophylactic, easing it onto the shaft. Reflexively she tastes her fingers and makes a face.

"Stand up," I say. I motion for her to get up from the bed. She does as I tell her.

I lie down on my back. "I like to do it this way."

She climbs on top of me, her lean thighs straddling my hips. She grinds her pubic bone against mine. I moan. She smiles again.

I shudder, feigning my orgasm as well as she does hers. I think of the same thing I always think of: a movie I saw as a teenager. I share my essence with no one.

We dress without speaking. The only sound is the futile swish-thup of the fan. Somehow the air smells worse than when we first arrived.

I pull a sheaf of bills from my pocket and lay them on the night table. "You really nice guy, Joe," she says. "You come again sometime, okay? Don't forget."

My turn to smile.

As I step from the hotel to the street, I am thinking about the poison. I am thinking that in thirty-six hours, she'll be dead.

..

The room where I work is always dark, despite the searing light of the surgical lamps. The smell of the room is likewise constant -- alcohol, formaldehyde, ammonia. The meat tables are pure, stainless steel slabs for sacrifice, made holy by the passing of blood. The kind of altar that Mama's never seen.

She thought I'd be unhappy: fresh out of medical school, the most promising graduate. My advisor, Dr. Allan, said that I was the sanest overachiever he'd ever met.

Here I perform autopsies. Here I prep bodies for the journey home.

The chief of medicine, a colonel, gave me a speech when I arrived. The speech was about spoiled brats, the privileged who hide out in fine schools while grunts do all of the dying. He rubbed my face in it. His war-weary wisdom was quite simple. "We're not really doctors here," he said. "We're just playing doctor."

Mama would say that I've been playing doctor all my life.

I unzip the black body-bags slowly -- I always do. Object there is none. Passion there is none. I imagine the mother of the body underhand, knowing that motherhood and apple pie are the reasons for perforated aortas, dismembered limbs, ruptured brain tissue.

Mama writes to me every day. She asks about the war, about the weather. She thinks that I'm saving lives, performing surgery under fire. I let her believe what she wants.

I never speak to the bodies. This one's chest is a black cavity. The next one has no entrails, as it should be in this place. The penis is gone, too. Whenever a body is left sexless, I think of the story Mama tells about a military man named Percy Grimm -- his lovely uniform crisp and clean -- hunting down and castrating another man named Joe Christmas. Percy Grimm, the Avenger. Percy Grimm, the Facist. Percy Grimm, who is really Tom Sawyer grown up.

I could be Percy Grimm.

My reports vary in length, depending upon the damage that has been inflicted -- descriptions of wounds, paragraphs detailing cause of death, I clean and embalm the remains and zip them into a fresh bag. No maggots for the folks back home.

..

A C.I.D. man comes to visit me, a lieutenant. "Your chief recommended you, Doctor," he says deferentially. "He tells me you're an expert in toxicology."

My speciality goes unappreciated in this place. The killing in Vietnam is not subtle.

"The Saigon police have asked us for help with a

case. Not in any official capacity, you understand. It's just that their investigative techniques are rather . . . primitive. Compared to ours. We've agreed to give them a hand."

I ask, "What's this got to do with me?"

He is unaccustomed to sharing information with strangers. "They've had some . . . homicides. Nine victims so far, that they know of. All poisoned."

I wait.

"They can't seem to identify what kind of poison it is that's being used," he says. "Which means they've got no leads. Neither their people nor anybody at our own lab could dope it out. That's why I've come to you."

He waits.

At last I say politely, "What can I do to help?"

I sit beside him calmly as he drives. I ask myself: *Is this some kind of trap?* But I do not feel trapped. If it is a trap, then the lieutenant is a clever man. A consummate dissembler.

He parks his jeep in front of Saigon's City Hall -- their center of civic government. I follow him into the building and down a flight of stairs. "The morgue's this way," he says.

He pushes open a door.

The stench makes him suck in his breath. The place is a filthy abattoir. Two Vietnamese -- a doctor and a policeman -- stand beside a table. A nude body lies under dull light.

I cross to the table and look down at the face. I resist the urge to smile and say hello. It's been four days since I left her. I hear her voice: *You really nice guy, Joe.*

"They found her last night in an alley," says the lieutenant. "Victim number nine."

I push open her eyelids. She stares at me.

"She's a prostitute," says the lieutenant. "Just like the other victims."

"Have any lab studies been done on her yet?" I ask.

He shakes his head. "We were hoping you'd want to do that yourself, Doctor. No one here has done anything at all to her. We didn't want to risk messing things up for you."

"I appreciate that," I say. "I appreciate that very much."

..

While I am composing my report, mail call brings my daily missive from Mama. The envelope and stationery are almost damp with the scent of Moondrops.

"How do you like Mama's new fragrance?" she asks, straightening my collar.

"I like it very much."

She smiles, then says, "I love your ROTC uniform. It's much more manly than your Boy Scout khakis. You were cute when you were a Scout, but now you're a handsome young man. You'll even be shaving soon. I'll

have to buy you a shaving kit."

She pauses to study me. "We need to have one of our talks today, honey -- don't you think? I'll be in my room when you get home from school."

After the last bell, I stay behind to talk to Miss Dossin. I admire her perfect, white teeth. She, like Mama, tells me how much she loves a man in uniform. I walk the long way home.

The house is quiet and cool, the shades drawn against the afternoon sun. I creep silently up the steps and down the hall, as if to take her by surprise. I knock gently.

"Who is it?"

"Mama's little soldier."

"Come in, come in."

She sits at her vanity, her back to the door, dressed in a sleeveless and strapless black gown. "Mama has a headache," she whispers. "Could you come and soothe it, please?"

I take my place behind her, rubbing her temples and her neck.

"Mama has sore shoulders, too."

As I massage her, she strokes the tops of my hands, directing them with the slightest pressure toward her breasts. She turns and pulls my face to hers with both hands. She kisses me hard on the mouth.

She breaks the kiss, gets up, and moves toward the bed.

I listen for her slight exhalation of breath when my hand caresses her back. I unzip the black satin slowly. The dress slips easily over her hips and falls around her ankles in a heap. Her undergarments are black: black strapless bra, black panties, a black garter-belt, black stockings.

She sighs, "Let me help my little soldier out of his uniform."

She takes off my coat, tie, shirt, shoes and socks, belt and pants. "We'll leave your underpants on," she says. "We can't be too careful."

She sits on the bed and reaches around to unfasten her bra. "Watch me," she breathes. Her breasts, pendulous orbs, fall from the cups. She unhooks her stockings and rolls them slowly to her ankles. She extends one leg and then the other, and I remove her stockings. She stands up. "Help me with my panties."

I kneel before her and slide the black lace down her smooth thighs. I look up. Mama smiles at me between her breasts. The panties drop to her ankles. I collect them at her feet, laying them neatly on the chair with the rest of her lingerie.

"Lie down," she commands.

She climbs onto me. She pulls my penis through the fly of my undershorts and massages it into an erection. She unwraps what looks to be a sausage skin, rolling its cold wetness toward my scrotum. My expression questions her.

"Your getting older will make things more complicated," she says. "We have to be careful. We can't afford to be irresponsible. Remember that, honey. Mama's little soldier must never be irresponsible."

..

"How's everything coming, Doctor?" asks the lieutenant, taking a seat at my desk.

I hand him the file folder containing my report. "I can summarize for you, if you like."

"If you don't mind."

I explain that the poison is a naturally occurring substance rather than synthetically derived, making it more difficult to trace. It is a slow-acting agent similar to *Atropa belladonna*, though dissimilar enough to suggest a mutation of some sort, probably native to Vietnam. It is a topical poison, absorbed through a mucus membrane. The cause of death is renal failure.

"Could she have come in contact with the poison by accident?" he asks.

"It's unlikely."

His forehead creases. "So what does this tell us about the man we're looking for?"

"Man'?"

"Or woman. The killer."

I shake my head. "I'm afraid that's outside my area of expertise, Lieutenant."

He taps the folder against his leg. "Well," he says, "I'll turn this over to my people and see how they want to follow up on it." He rises and grips my hand. "Thank you for your help."

"My pleasure."

..

I always use a clean table for my procedure.

I unroll the prophylactic carefully. This sheath of latex is my only shield, a thin barrier between myself and death. I pinch a surgical sponge with forceps and dip it into the distilled poison. With the sponge, I paint the tip of the prophylactic and let it dry to a white film.

Never in all my studies have I encountered an agent with such unusual characteristics. The alkaloid properties at less than body temperature cannot be absorbed. But when heated through direct physical contact -- and friction -- the alkaloid finds its way with lethal efficiency.

I carry death in the silver cigarette case that Mama gave me as a going-away present. Its only ornamentation is my initials etched in script. I don't smoke. Mama's gift serves a purpose that she did not intend. It keeps out the Vietnam swelter until I give the whores their orders. A few have even tried to steal it.

I pour a shallow pool of stabilizing fluid into the case. I roll the prophylactic so that the ring it forms is



firm and tight -- tighter than when it was originally packed. For a moment it floats like a life preserver. I snap the lid shut.

My uniform is fresh from the laundry. I polish my shoes and begin dressing for the night ahead. I put on clean underwear, socks and garters, starched shirt, creased trousers, shoes, tie, jacket, and gloves. I check myself in the mirror, buff my tie clasp, position my hat.

I put Mama's cigarette case in my breast pocket.

..

The streets of Saigon are garish, hallucinatory -- a carnival midway. Predators. And prey.

She is exactly the same as the others: thin, dark-haired, almond-eyed, malnourished, addicted. Cheap. She takes me to her room.

We undress. I hold open my cigarette case. She unrolls the sheath lovingly. Mounts me.

The door bursts open. The whore screams.

The C.I.D. lieutenant stands in the doorway. Behind him are two military policemen. He speaks over his shoulder to the MPs. "This, officers," he says, "is what is known as *coitus interruptus*."

He turns back to me. I see the indifference and cold hatred and triumph in his eyes. "Get dressed, Doctor."

The whore sits dumbfoundedly on the bed, watching me as I put my uniform back on. Neither I nor the lieutenant nor the MPs say a word to her. I wonder if the lieutenant knows that there is no antidote for the poison. I wonder if he intends to tell her that she's going to die.

..

The interrogation room at military police headquarters is a cramped closet. In the room are a small, metal table and three metal chairs. The furniture is pewter-colored, the same as an autopsy slab. The room stinks of burnt tobacco and fear.

There are two of us here: the lieutenant and me. A tape recorder sits in the middle of the table between us. The machine is on.

"You were the prime suspect all along," the lieutenant says. "We were certain that the killer was an American soldier, since that's who the victims catered to. I figured to be one of their Johns who was killing them. I lied when I told you that the C.I.D. lab hadn't determined the nature of the toxin you'd been using. We knew the murderer had to be someone who possessed extensive knowledge. What we couldn't figure out, though, was how you transmitted the poison to your victims. That's why I've been tailing you these past few days."

I watch his eyes.

"What were you thinking about the day I enlisted your help?" he asks. "You certainly must have appreci-

ated the irony. Were you feeling superior when you thought you were pulling something over on us? I'd like to know, I really would. Did you think I was a jackass or something? 'The fool doesn't know -- I'm the very one he's looking for!'"

"Is that what you believe, Lieutenant?"

He shakes his head sadly. "Your killing those women . . . makes no sense to me at all."

"Do you really expect me to explain?"

Before he can reply, there is a knock at the door. He rises to admit an MP who hands him a sheaf of papers. I recognize Mama's stationery, the smell of her perfume.

The MP whispers something in the lieutenant's ear. The lieutenant looks at me, his eyes narrowing. It is an expression of displeasure and surprise. The news -- whatever it might be -- is unexpected.

I smile at him. He does not smile back.

..

I have a private cell, eight feet by eight feet. Underground, so there is no window to the world outside. A cot, a toilet with no seat, a porcelain pan for a sink, a bare light bulb that dangles from the ceiling. There is no switch. I turn the light on and off by screwing and unscrewing the bulb. How long I am in the cell, I cannot guess. The Evening and the Morning are the same Day.

..

The lieutenant asks, "Who wrote these letters, Doctor?"

"Mama did."

There is a third man with us in the interrogation room. A major general, obviously someone highly placed in the C.I.D. The lieutenant's superior officer.

"Captain," the general says gently, "your mother's dead. She died three months ago."

"Who wrote these letters, Doctor?" repeats the lieutenant.

"Mama did."

The general turns to the lieutenant. "Did you tell the captain that we've spoken to his father?"

"Yes, sir."

"And that we were informed as to the circumstances surrounding his mother's . . . tragic passing? Just after he arrived here?"

"Yes, sir."

The general turns back to me. "Son, we know that it must have been a terrible blow to hear that your mother . . . took her own life. I spoke to your father personally. He told me that you and she were very close. I told him how much the Army regretted not being able to get you back home in time for the funeral. Not being able to get you back at all, in fact. We're very sorry about that."

"Please, Captain," the lieutenant urges me. "Tell

me who wrote these letters to you."
"Mama did."

**

A psychiatrist visits me in my cell. A captain, like myself.

"Tell me about your mother."

I am my mother.

"Tell me about your father."

I am not my father.

The psychiatrist leaves.

I imagine the scene in the general's office: the three of them there -- the lieutenant, the psychiatrist, the general himself. The psychiatrist gives him his report.

The lieutenant: "He's murdered ten women! You can't possibly be suggesting that he has grounds for an insanity plea!"

The psychiatrist: "But he does, Lieutenant, because he is clearly insane. The graphologist's analysis indicates that he wrote those letters himself, imitating his mother's handwriting. He began killing prostitutes one week after she died. My own report will verify the captain's severe Oedipal fixation. Any defense counselor worth his salt will tear the prosecution's case to shreds."

The lieutenant: "Then what's the point of court-martialing him at all, if we know he's going to be found not guilty?"

The psychiatrist: "He *has* to be tried."

The general: "No, gentlemen, he does not. You're forgetting the father. He is among the highest-ranking officers on staff at Walter Reed. Just last week he treated

the President himself. He's been a military man his entire life. He also happens to have two more stars than I have."

The lieutenant: "Oh, my god . . ."

The general: "I have my orders, gentlemen."

The lieutenant: "Sir, you can't . . ."

The general: "I already have. The Army protects its own, son. The Army protects its own."

I am my mother.

**

I am free.

In my travel bag are papers honorably discharging me from the service. A transport plane departs presently. The plane will take me first to Tokyo. Then to Honolulu. Then California.

I am free.

The general promises that my record will be kept clean -- his part of the bargain. My part -- I must return home to the States and behave myself.

I am free.

There is a job awaiting me in San Francisco, a staff position at a hospital downtown. Courtesy of my father.

I am free.

I'm not familiar with the city. I've never been here before. Mama once lived here, when she was first married. She still says, in some of our talks, that it is a sinful place.

I am free.

I can't wait to tell Mama that I'm here. Won't she be proud of me?

- CD

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Hannah squatted on her haunches in the passenger seat, her hands resting on the Mercedes dashboard, her buttocks rising and falling to the Indian drumming on the radio.

Jeffery looked at his wife out of the corner of his eye, trying to remember if she were about to start her period. He decided to ignore her and the music as they rolled eastward toward the New Mexico border.

"OH-H-H, akshe toe," she moaned, pointing. Ahead, something was dead on the road. As the car approached, two vultures grudgingly gave up their meal and flapped lazily into the cloudless sky. "STOP THE CAR," Hannah screamed, throwing the back of her hand into her husband's face.

Bone Throwing's premise is based on a true case history from Sutphen's book, **Unseen Influences** (Pocket Books 1982). With an armful of roadkill bones and a rapidly decomposing mind, Hannah meets a young family and the horror begins. ISBN-0-87554-475-4—Tape ST102—\$9.95

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Richard Sutphen (pronounced Sut'-fen) has an ideal background for writing horror fiction. He's authored 12 psychic investigation books, seven for Simon & Schuster Pocket books, who calls him "America's Foremost Psychic Researcher."

After years of exploring actual occult horrors, he is writing fiction about the dark side of real potentials. Sutphen often lectures on brainwashing techniques and psychic ability. He has created lines of martial arts and self-help mind-programming tapes. He lives in the Los Angeles area with his wife and children.

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MELANIE TEM's short stories have appeared in *Women of Darkness I & II*, *Skin of the Soul*, *Whispers*, and many other publications. She lives in North Denver with her husband, author Steve Rasnic Tem. Look for Melanie's novel debut in June -- *Prodigal* from Dell Abyss. "Secrets" is a powerful tale of gut-wrenching emotional horror. Enjoy this one . . . if you can.

When Christy didn't answer to her knock, as she'd known she would not, Grace felt justified in pushing open the door. The music struck her in the face, but she held her ground.

Still half-expecting the door to be locked and barricaded, although that wasn't possible now, she was a little taken aback to find herself actually on the threshold. At first she just stood there and said, "Christina! Answer me!" again. Despite all the times she'd been forced to come in here, it remained a private and alien place.

But she had to go on in, for her daughter's sake and her own, and certainly Christy wasn't going to stop her now. Sometimes a mother had to do unpleasant or dangerous things, even things that were morally wrong, in order to save her child. Grace had already had plenty of experience with that sort of maternal obligation, and would soon have more. Her throat tightened at the thought. When you loved someone, when you were responsible for them, you couldn't allow them to keep secrets from you.

"Oh, leave her alone, Gracie," Vic used to tell her. "You can't get inside her head no matter what you do." Grace was terrified that that might be true.

"You read my diary!" She heard Christy's voice in the music, although Christy couldn't possibly be speaking to her now. "You listen in on my phone conversations!" She hadn't denied it; she had done all those things, and she would do more.

Music, the diabolical and incomprehensible music that Christy wouldn't turn off day or night, was obscuring any other sounds from the room, if there were any. Sometimes it seemed to be blurring Grace's vision, too, and the feel of things; it left a foul taste in her mouth.

The tape playing now had been one of Christy's favorites. The name of the group was Devil's Handmaiden. Grace had made it a point to memorize their blasphemous names and to learn how to recognize one from another. She knew individual performers, too -- the girls with layered faces, the boys with secret pasts. They were none of them what they seemed to be, of course, or

what they wanted their audiences to think they were.

Grace could have sung along:

Bring him to me
Suck him to me
Semen, blood, and flame
Make him hold me
Make him come, and
Tell his other name.

"Chris-ty!" Grace called again, although she knew it was pointless. "Turn that thing down!"

She could have sung along, but she didn't. The lyrics were tempting, the tune catchy, the beat hypnotic, but by now she recognized the work of the Devil when she heard it.

And anyway, the words on the surface weren't the true message of the song. The true message was always hidden, cleverly subliminal. Only people who knew the codes and were willing to take the risk could face the Enemy head-on. Grace was more than willing.

"Christy, I'm talking to you!"

Grace took a deep breath and stepped into her daughter's room. Old smoke -- from incense, cigarettes, marijuana -- made her cough and almost instantly gave her a ringing headache. The floor was littered with piles of clothes, tape cases, straws, long thick pins like hatpins, wads of paper. From the bookcase that hid Christy's bed from the door glowed layers of graffiti, lipstick over spray paint over grape juice, messages and designs so obscured by each other that their meanings had multiplied beyond Grace's comprehension. The heavy crooked curtains dimmed the morning sunlight. Grace resisted the familiar urge to fling open curtains and window, knowing from long and bitter experience that the evil secrets in this room would not be aired out so easily.

The music soared from its continuous tape. It was one of Satan's many voices, intended to keep her from understanding her child. It said things to her that made her sick, things that most other people couldn't or wouldn't hear. Sometimes Satan sang in Vic's voice, or Christy's, or her own.

Frightened, Grace allowed herself to retreat. What she had to do this morning wouldn't be easy, even though she knew it was the right thing to do, her duty to her daughter. She needed more time to prepare, to gather her strength and courage.

She backed up and closed Christy's door. The

music muted a little but was still louder than any other sound, including her own heartbeat and her own thoughts. Holding her breath, she pressed her ear against the door as she had so many times before, and now couldn't stop herself from swaying with the rhythm and lip-synching the brisk words:

Born to play
Died to say
Come again another day.

Knowledge of what lay beyond the door, beyond the bookcase partition in her daughter's room, forced itself into Grace's consciousness before she could stop it, and she gasped and pressed her palms against the door frame for support. The music didn't stop.

"It's just music," Vic had tried to tell her twenty years ago. Or, "It's a *positive* thing. It's about love and peace." She'd smoked a lot of dope, taken a few acid and mescaline trips, and even so she hadn't realized until much later -- until she had a daughter who listened to a different generation of music, and whose body and mind and soul Grace as her mother was responsible for -- who Jude and Alice were.

The tape ended. Before it looped over to the other side, Grace hurried into the kitchen, humming under her breath.

She switched on the radio over the counter. It was always tuned to one of the numerous oldies stations, and she came in on the middle of "Knights in White Satin." Singing loudly, half-dancing from counter to sink, she finished up the breakfast dishes. There weren't many. It had been a long time since she and Christy had eaten a meal together -- a long time, for that matter, since Christy had come out of her room.

The pictures of Vic and Christy on the side of the refrigerator caught her attention. Hands in the dishwasher, she stared at them one by one. From down the hall in Christy's room and from the radio inches from her face, music poured its dark secrets; she could very nearly decipher them now just by listening in a certain way.

There were dozens of pictures:

Christy as a baby, here laughing and there crying at something forever out of camera range. Vic asleep; Grace had crawled across the bed and held the camera as close as she'd dared, hoping to capture some dream image or thought wave through his eyelids, but the flash had awakened him and he'd pushed her roughly away.

A young, bearded, pony-tailed Vic, with slightly glazed eyes and earphones on his head. Grace remembered how she, with youthful naivete, had pressed her ear against the outside of the earphones while he was wearing them, hoping to hear what he heard. Like nearly everything else in those days, it had turned into a kind of foreplay, and she never had been able to detect anything but a subaudible vibration.

Christy's high school graduation picture, posed and smoothed, her very expression looking air-brushed. Christy and Vic caught in an eternally private conversation on the front porch swing; she'd snapped the picture from the other side of the living room window, and they never did tell her what they'd been talking about.

Grace dried the last saucer and put it away. She thought she heard movement in the back of the cupboard or in the wall behind it, and when she stood on tiptoe to run her fingers back there she seemed to feel an irregularity in the surfaces that hadn't been there yesterday when she'd done her every-other-day cleaning of cupboards and drawers. Even the house she lived in had secrets from her.

The music on the radio had ended and a man was reading the news. The voice had a thick, choked vibrato, as though he had something caught in his throat, some story he was keeping to himself. Grace had known for a long time that news had hidden messages, that certain words and phrases stood for other things they didn't say. But she didn't have time now to try decoding it.

She turned off the radio, leaving herself alone with the muffled music from Christy's tape. Taking a deep breath, she reached for the butcher block knife holder, a wedding present from her sister. Over the years it had proved to be true that the knives never needed sharpening; even so, she worried now that none of them would really be sharp enough.

Hefting a long thin paring knife, her hand brushed against something and sent it rattling into the sink. Vic's bones and teeth, half a dozen small chunks she'd saved from his ashes. Because they'd come from actually *inside* him, she felt close to him when she held them in her palm or touched her tongue to them. One by one she picked them out of the drain and put them back into their clear plastic bottle on the windowsill, where light could shine through. Her hands were trembling from this reminder of the secrets Vic must have taken with him to the grave.

He'd had plenty of secrets. One time, for instance, he'd gone out and bought himself six new white shirts, identical to each other and to the ones already in his closet; Grace hadn't known about it until days later, when she'd happened to find the tags and straight pins in the trash. Sometimes when she got back from an errand the TV would be warm, and when she confronted him about it he'd say, "Oh, some dumb show. What's wrong with that?" Often -- at dinner, in bed, at a school function for Christy -- she'd know from the look on his face that he was thinking about something else; "a penny for your thoughts," she'd say, trying to keep it light, or, directly, "What are you thinking about, Vic?" Always, he'd frown and say, "Nothing."

But even after having lived with that for eighteen years, Grace had been shocked and vindicated to discover after his death his greatest and longest-running secret, of which she had had no inkling. On her dresser



-- beside the jewelry box with the false bottom that he'd given her for their seventh anniversary, among the dozens of plastic sandwich bags that held nail clippings and curls of his hair and scraps of discarded clothing -- was a shoebox full of his love letters to and from women whose names she'd never heard, whose existence she'd never guessed.

That was never going to happen to her again. She was not going to be ambushed. Christy had been slipping away from her for years, and now had taken the final, irremediable step. Time was running out, and she was going to find out now, once and for all, what was inside her daughter's head.

But she was not quite ready. Her heart was pounding in her ears and her hands weren't steady enough. There was one more step to take in preparation. She slipped the knife into her apron pocket and went into the living room.

This room was certainly more comfortable than it used to be. Vic would hardly recognize it. Christy wouldn't be coming in here at all anymore.

Grace veered away from that thought and anxiously surveyed the room for things she'd missed. She'd boxed up for Goodwill any books she hadn't personally read from cover to cover, including two full sets of encyclopedias; until the truck had come to pick them up, she'd still been uneasy with all those secret words in her house. She'd taken down any photographs that had her in them; staring back at the versions of herself that the camera had caught, she never could reconstruct what had been going through her mind at the time. She'd had the fireplace opened that had been hidden in the wall, not so she could use it but so that things couldn't hide in there; even so, last winter a bird had gotten trapped in the chimney and, once the fluttering and frantic chirping had stopped, Grace had kept imagining the feathers and tiny hollow bones.

Feeling reasonably safe, she crossed to the stereo, knelt, pulled *The Magical Mystery Tour* from the record rack, slipped it out of its rainbow cover with the 24-page picture book that never had seemed to her to have much to do with the songs. Her hands were trembling so that she had trouble finding the spindle. She'd had the turntable and LPs since college, high school, junior high. Christy, when Christy was still speaking to her, used to make elaborate fun of such old-fashioned stuff; although she'd admitted to liking some of the 50s and 60s music on the radio, she'd no more have watched a black-and-white movie.

Thinking about that time not so long ago, when she had known a little of what her daughter was thinking, brought tears to Grace's eyes. For most of her life, Christy had been easy to read and had welcomed the attention.

"You seem worried," Grace would offer, and that was all it would take for the child to crawl into her lap

and tell her all about the dead bird on the sidewalk or the playground bully.

"Are you nervous about the test tomorrow?"

"I'll bet you're excited about the new kittens."

"It makes you mad when we won't let you do something, doesn't it?"

During those years Grace had felt terribly close to her daughter. It had been almost as though Christy had never left her body or her mind.

Then, around junior high, things had changed. Vic had died by then, taking some secrets with him and leaving others behind for her to find, and Grace was on her own, scrambling to understand the hunted look that would come over Christy's face whenever she'd say something supportive or attentive like, "You're not really upset about homework. I know what this is about. This is about boys."

"I have no private life! You know everything about me!"

"I was your age once. I remember--"

"You can read my mind! Stay out of my mind!"

Then came the silences and the absences, the cryptic messages for Christy on the answering machine from people who didn't identify themselves, the coded notes deliberately left out for Grace to puzzle over. Then came the drugs, which hopelessly muddled everything. And now Christy was dead, but that was still a secret.

Grace turned the stereo on, wincing at the labored noises it made, and lowered the needle onto the first track of Side 1. The record was scratchy and dusty, but it took only a few bars -- ". . . coming to take you away" -- before she was hugging herself and dancing around the room, which, for all her exorcisms, was filling up with secrets again.

She danced and sang along with "Fool on the Hill" and "Flying," "Blue Jay Way" and "Your Mother Should Know," remembering most of the words. But when she heard the first few jaunty-melancholy notes of "I Am a Walrus," spreading abruptly into a stirring dissonance, she stopped still and listened.

"I am he as you are he as you are me as we are all together."

That used to make perfect, luminous sense, and anyone who didn't get it had been hopelessly straight. She remembered the high of believing that -- through music, through love -- people could actually come to understand each other. She remembered dancing in an intimate crowd to just this music, grooving and making love to this music in flickering multicolored darkness with lovers whose names and histories and even whose secrets didn't matter because the music said the truth.

Now it said nothing. Grace listened intently all the way through the song, and it was sheer nonsense. "Koo-koo-ka-choo." She remembered when she'd thought she could decipher the bits of conversation at the end, important messages about life and love and the future of the

world. Now it was garble.

The true messages in the Beatles' music had always been hidden, waiting for those who knew and cared enough to tease them out. In the 60s, she'd dismissed that notion as establishment paranoia or acid-induced delusions of grandeur, but as her head had cleared in the ensuing twenty years she'd realized that it was true. After all, she had heard for herself any number of times the secret of "The White Album" -- which, of course, had turned out to be a lie.

When she knelt again in front of the stereo, the knife in her pocket thumped awkwardly against her thigh, but for now she ignored it. She moved the needle back to the beginning of the last track and then quickly, before those first notes sounded, began rotating the record backwards.

At first she heard only unintelligible rasps and screeches and, afraid that just since yesterday she'd somehow lost the ability to hear the secret message, she fought down panic. To give herself stamina, she thought of Christy dead in her bed of a drug overdose, accident or suicide. She kept spinning the record faster and faster until the muscles of her upper arm were shaking from the strain and she had to support her right elbow with her left hand.

Finally she heard the words that had been imbedded in this song for her to discover at this time and place in her life. "Peel away," it said. "Peel away." She knew it was the voice of God.

Grace listened to the song backwards. Once was all she needed. Then, very carefully, she set the needle back on its armature and turned the stereo off. In the sudden silence, the music from Christy's room came to her like the wail of a mad infant, demanding something of her that she could not comprehend, nattering secrets to itself in an alien tongue.

Grace moved rapidly now, purposefully. This time she didn't bother with the charade of knocking on her daughter's door, and she hardly hesitated at the threshold. The smoke made her cough. Her head ached. The music numbed her ears, tongue, fingertips. She pushed her way through the debris on the floor and around the bookcase. When she saw Christy's body on the bed, she cried out wordlessly and fell to her knees, reminding herself again and again what the Beatles had instructed her to do.

Christy's body was cold and rubbery. Things seemed to be seeping out of it; her soul, maybe, or body fluids. Christy still had secrets inside her head and heart. Grace didn't know where to start.

Devil's Handmaiden was chanting joyously when Grace took a deep breath and inserted the point of the paring knife into Christy's temple. There wasn't much blood. She made a long slit and then, as the music spoke secrets to her, she peeled a thick strip of flesh away and rose to peer inside her daughter's head.

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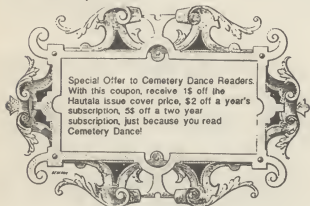


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T. LIAM McDONALD INTERVIEWS PETER STRAUB

PROFILES IN TERROR

PETER STRAUB: The Violent and The Sacred, PART 2

Reading Peter Straub's *Floating Dragon* one is given the impression that it was consciously to be his final bow-out of supernatural subject matter. Distinct among horror novels of the last two decades it came to the marketplace with a set of preconceptions and the phrase *tour de force* written all over it. It has the feeling of a final statement from a man who may have said all he has to say with this form. "Certainly I was aware going in," Straub admits, "that I wanted it to be about excess. If I could think of something, I was going to put it in. So it got gaudier and gaudier. It seemed that horror invited that. I was trying to show what I could do given an absolutely free hand without any circumscriptions or proscriptions. I wanted to write the wildest, splashiest horror novel that I could. In retrospect, I may have done that out of a sense that my interest in that kind of horror was coming to an end. *Floating Dragon* seemed very beautiful and full of possibility. It seemed like a Mahler symphony, with themes and sub-themes, the flutes trilling way up high and the cellos bowing away like



PHOTO CREDIT: Beth Gwinn

crazy underneath."

But the critics were waiting to pounce, and *Floating Dragon* with all its enthusiastic, glorious excessiveness, was perfect fodder for them. They were sharpening their knives to eviscerate *Floating Dragon* almost before it hit the stands. In retrospect, the judgements were far off base and obviously tempered by a backlash to Straub's phenomenal success. The novel centers around two interwoven devices: one a cyclic evil which returns once in a generation, the other a cloud of deadly floating gas; both of which turn the small town of Hampstead, Connecticut into a nightmare. The plot proceeds like an intense fever dream, with violent, horrifying imagery assailing the reader at every turn. Even in the midst of a barrage of literary pyrotechnics, the characters still manage to live and feel and convey a sense of humanity from within a world turned upside down. Experimenting with fractured time, shifting perspectives, and an inside-out narrative drive, the author still manages to create a kaleidoscopic portrait of absolute horror visited upon a small town.

After *Floating Dragon*, Straub went straight into the writing of *The Talisman* with Stephen King. Since the 1970s they had talked about collaborating, but it wasn't until the early 1980s that story, writing time, and sheer will all fell into place. The beginning and end were written in total collaboration, with both men seated at the computer. In between, they bounced text back and forth via computer modem.

The highly publicized collaboration of the two best-selling horror novelists in the world was greeted with so much fanfare that the novel itself became somewhat overshadowed. Many hardcore horror fans gave it a lukewarm reception since it wasn't "straight horror," whatever that is. Instead of producing a "definitive" horror novel, Straub and King instead created a dark-fantasy "quest" novel set in a parallel world, with

conscious echoes of *Huck Finn* and all the quest novels ever written. It is as much a story about a boy's coming of age as it is a journey to "get-it-and-bring-it-back."

Asked if they would ever collaborate again, Straub replies that he doubts it, though he admits there was a time when it could have happened:

"I had an idea that I thought would be really fun to work on with Steve. It was much simpler and shorter than *The Talisman*: turned out to be. It would be all suspense, nothing but tension from the first word to the last. I proposed it to Steve, and I thought it would be so much fun to see him get on his great big motorcycle and just barrel over this thing. He wrote back saying, *For reasons I will tell you about later, I can't touch this idea*. Later he wrote to me and said it was very much like a book that another writer had been working on, and which this other writer had asked Steve to finish for him. So he couldn't then work on a novel with me that had basically the same idea.

"Steve is a real trip, and it would be fun at some point to work again with him. As the days go by it seems less and less likely that it will ever happen. I have no interest in collaborating unless Steve is struck by some brilliant notion that also appeals to me. We would have to define things much more clearly than we did the last time out, because that was a real struggle. It took a long, long time, and there were many incidental glories and beauties. Writing the end of it was one of the most moving things that ever happened to me. We wrote the beginning and the ending side by side, and that was an amazing experience. If we could write a whole book that way it would be kind of nice. But we couldn't. Steve by now is his own continent, and if I were my own continent I don't know if I would want to collaborate with anybody."

Towards the end of writing *Floating Dragon*, before work began

on *The Talisman*, Peter said to his wife, *You know, I'm really working hard. I haven't had any time off in a long time. This thing with Steve is also going to take a long time, and when that's done, I'm going to need a period to recoup and regroup. I think I'll take a year off and read a lot of books and relax and travel a little bit. With The Talisman done he was exhausted and unhappy and consciously did not write anything for a year. "I thought about Koko," he says. "I took a long trip to the Far East to think about it, but otherwise*



I hardly thought about writing. I solidified my friendships with various people I wanted to know, various jazz musicians. So I stayed up late many nights, listening to a lot of jazz, or just hanging out with them, since that's when they hung out.

"In retrospect, I shouldn't have done it. It was too long to take off and it took me too long to get back into my stride afterwards. It was a period of more instability than stability. Once I started writing again the first thing I wrote was 'Blue Rose,' which virtually demanded to be written. I was sitting on my lawn

in Westport, reading a really hokey book called *The Freudian Fallacy*, when I had this idea that I knew was hot. I jumped up instantly and wrote down notes. A couple of weeks later I started to write it and I knew I was hooked. I really cared about it. I knew it had something to do with *Koko*, and that it would help me get into *Koko*."

"Blue Rose" (along with "The Juniper Tree") was the first piece of what was to become *Koko*. They are the stories written by Straub's alter-ego: the homosexual writer Tim Underhill. "Blue Rose" tells the story of young Harry Beevers' experiment with hypnotism that leads to his brother's death. The character isn't precisely the same Harry Beevers of *Koko*, but in writing "Blue Rose" the author began to learn more about his character.

"The story claimed me so much that I knew my holiday was over, but writing was really really difficult. If I had kept on writing during that period I don't know what I would have written, but it wouldn't have been so hard for me to do *Koko*. I learned that that is how I am stable: by writing. It's not by lying on my back drinking beer, it's by sitting at my machine or writing by hand and making things up, or discovering things that are actually real but invented. At first I loved 'Blue Rose' so much because it was the first thing I had made in a long time. I didn't make *The Talisman*. Some third being that was the product of Steve and myself made it. So I didn't have that sense of absolute involvement that you have when you actually write something on your own and it's made by your own hands."

Koko was a long time in coming (almost five years following *Floating Dragon*) and many people wondered where Straub had gone. A book he had thought would take a year to write wound up taking three as he tried to get back into the daily pace of writing. "When I started writing *Koko* I was amazed by how badly I was writing, and I was terri-

fied by that. A sense of dread kept me working and rewriting. I wound up with this spare, step-by-step language that struck me as limiting, but honest. I thought I'd have the rest of my life with this kind of afflicted but pure style. The year went by, I got all the rest of it back, and I could write things freely and sum things up and suggest things. I certainly discovered that writing was how I stayed sane and happy."

What was the result of this experience?



"I was a more rational writer. I learned a lot more, knew a lot more about myself. It seemed to me I was a little less goofy, a little less strange as a human being, a little more a part of the texture of daily life; which was just the way I wanted my work to be. I was really determined only to write about things I believed in. And I figured out a way to do that and still have it have some power and be interesting."

Koko is not a supernatural novel by any stretch of the imagination. After *Floating Dragon* and after *The Talisman*, Straub realized that his interest in conventional supernatural subject matter had waned.

He does, however, point out that he's getting a little more interested in it again. The Robert Aickman-inspired "Mrs. God" from *Houses Without Doors* "flirts with conventional supernatural content. It might be hard to see, but it's certainly about some sort of haunted house and some kind of innocent or lunatic that goes into it. I'd be surprised if, at some point in the three books after *The Throat* [his next novel], I don't see what I'm going to do with material that is directly supposed to be scary. I would have to come at it from another angle. In the middle of *Koko* I realized that I was writing differently. My style was different and my whole take on things was different. I think *Koko* is a much more mature book than virtually all of my earlier work. That doesn't mean it's better, but the understanding of all the people and their motives seemed to be more grown up."

Koko is a suspense novel that virtually redefines the category. All of the elements of style and theme that Straub had developed up to that point are honed to a killing edge. The plot involves four people who served together in Viet Nam and went through an experience similar to the Mai Lai massacre. They come together again at the request of their former Lieutenant (Harry Beevers) to hunt down one of their comrades, who they think is committing a series of murders. From this premise Straub spins out a tale that is equal parts mystery, suspense, psychological thriller, horror, and mainstream. As with *If You Could See Me Now*, there was a time where the author had the choice between realism and the supernatural:

"At the start of the book there was going to be some demonic thing in that cave that was a part of the explanation of what happened. For a long time that was present, but once I started to write I realized I couldn't do that. It wasn't going to fit anywhere, and I didn't want it to be that kind of book. I thought it would be much better without that element. It

seemed to me that there were more readers for non-supernatural books than for supernatural books. As I look at Anne Rice and Steve I wonder if I may be fooling myself, but a lot of these books aren't supernatural, they're just about really disturbed folks. Thomas Harris proves that point. Horror has just widened its bounds. It has just knocked out the walls. If *Red Dragon* is a horror novel, then what I'm writing is horror. Certainly the way I see things hasn't changed at all. If I was a horror writer then, then internally I still am. It seemed to me that I could keep all the readers I had and get some new ones too.

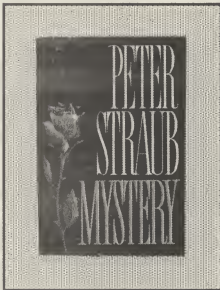
"When I write something I work it out of my system, which meant I ceased to be very interested in the supernatural novel per se, unless it was really, really good. I kind of exhausted that, I thought, for myself. On the other hand, I think all of the original intents were (and are) still intact, and all I wanted was to bring my subject matter closer to the world, closer to perceived experience."

The fact that other people still regard Straub as a horror writer is clear: *Koko* won the World Fantasy Award for best novel. He attributes this to the fact that "there is a lot of pain and darkness in that book, and I think that counts. That is the real content of horror fiction, or that's what it ought to be. It's about darkness and grief, and it has a good deal of violence. You can write about violence from all sorts of angles. If you write about it from that particular angle, then you might as well call it horror. Horror readers will find something in it that speaks to them."

Coming after a long period of inactivity, and then the seemingly endless writing of *Koko*, *Mystery* was written at an astonishing speed: a year. In part, this was due to the fact that both Dutton and Straub thought another novel should be published between *Koko* and the collection *Houses Without Doors*. In the end, this gave him time to write "Mrs.

God," which was completed after *Koko*. He honestly didn't think he could write another book in the amount of time he had. But once he was into it, and had thrashed out the size and shape of the completed novel, he calculated how many pages he needed to do, and then did them; ten pages a day, every day, for a long time.

"I moaned and bitched and carried on about how hard this was," he says, "but most of the time I was having a great time, because I was absolutely surrounded by an invented world. It was a paradise. I loved it! Once I got to Eagle Lake I was gone. I had no idea where anything was going, I just made notes as I went along. That's an analog for the process I went through during *Ghost Story*, and have really gone through every time since. If I don't know something, I just know that when I need to know it it'll be there. If it's not there when I need it, then I just don't do anything for a little while."



When *Mystery* was published, reactions varied. Some reviewers complained that it was character heavy, bloated and terribly unsatisfying as a mystery; while others loved it and wanted to see a series built around these characters. Both missed the point. To call a straight mystery novel *Mystery* would be absurd (like calling a humor novel *Humor*, et al),

and the mystery aspect is secondary to the story Straub has to tell, the characters he is exploring, and the world he has created. The title is not just a reference to the mystery of who killed whom, but to the multifaceted mystery of life, and the mystery of the world that lurks beneath our everyday experiences. "The whole book is seen through this lens that will take in intimations and hints," he says, "and so it isn't as far from *Ghost Story* as a superficial reading might indicate."

Though *Mystery* and *Koko* are realistic novels, there is a pervasive sense of the Romantic that immediately sets them apart from a great deal of crime fiction. "They're much more Romantic (in a literary sense) than ordinary crime novels ever are, with the exception of Raymond Chandler. There's a sense of *possibility* in them, a feeling that there might be some sort of grandeur just around the corner. There's also a sort of evaluation of what is dark, what is really painful and violent, and that stuff is seen in some sense as valuable. In ordinary crime writing it's not. That's what you want to solve and put away."

The island of Mill Walk is so perfectly created that it stands as Straub's greatest achievement yet in terms of evoking a place. It is against this backdrop of the casual rich that he tells his story of Tom Pasmore's relationship with the elderly detective Lamont von Heilitz, as the two try to solve two murders: one in the present and one in the past. *Mystery* functions at its best as a subtly satirical portrait of a particular class and time, ala F. Scott Fitzgerald. The Chandler-esque mystery elements add another layer of feeling, and there are some casual nods to Chandler, such as a pair of dead ladies found floating in a lake.

Mystery is the most overt treatment yet of Straub's more metaphysical themes, which have been suggested in almost all of his novels. There are times in this novel, as there are in *Ghost Story* and *Shad-*

owland, where the world beneath our world becomes visible, or, more correctly, "perceptible." It is a device one can see in the early novels of Thomas Wolfe (which Straub says made a huge impact upon him as a teenager) where this other world shines through the fabric of reality. Treated as either a literary device or a state of being, it makes for powerful fiction. Straub elaborates that what Wolfe, Joyce and others achieve in some of their writing is "the kind of thing that I have as a model of what I would really like to pull off, because of the way it makes the reader feel. It is an attempt to describe very important moments in my own life, just so I can see how they look, and see what happens when other people read them. It accounts for everything that is unexpressed in all my writing. In *Ghost Story*, for example, Lewis Benedict is jogging through the woods and suddenly there's something around him and he doesn't understand what it is. He thinks there is some story hidden there. Other people in that book, driving past the barren fields and trees, look at the trees and think *Gee, that means something*, but what does it mean?"

"I think very often in life we have those moments when some answer seems to hover. You don't know what it is, but the feeling that it is near is important and satisfying. Other times in life, if you're lucky, you see what the answer is. Those moments stay with you, and charge all the rest of your life, so that you know you have to be responsible to them. You learn something of immense value that cannot be taken from you, and when other people denigrate it, you know they just don't know what they're talking about. I had that glimpse below the surface all the time as a child. About once every ten years as an adult I get it, I see what it is, and I say *Thank you, now I can keep on going*. It's some sort of metaphysical revelation."

To see if other people shared his perceptions he read William James' *Varieties of Religious*

Experience, where, in one chapter on "Mysticism," there are many accounts of ordinary people describing similar things. "Because they were religious people," Peter explains, "they interpreted things through a religious lens. I didn't. I didn't think I was any nearer to Jesus than I did when I was an acolyte in the Lutheran church, and believe me, I wasn't near to Jesus then! Religion in general does kind of inhibit a certain level of perception. I still think it's quite important and necessary, and I would never denigrate it, but it seems to put up obstacles by telling you what to believe, and you have to believe in things that are, from any rational viewpoint, on the level of vampires. I think art may bring you closer to a state or a level of perception that might be thought of within the realms of religion, but does so without the layers of dogma. There is a feeling of transcendence, of some sense of real glory that is present in these experiences. I mean, it's goofy to talk about things in this way because the words are never adequate. But I thought I might as well bite the bullet and see if I could represent this on the page, and a novel called *Mystery* seemed to be the right place to do it."

Straub believes that these are a type of epiphany, and cites instances in *Houses Without Doors* as examples. In "The Buffalo Hunter," Bobby Bunting experiences something very similar, as does Standish in "Mrs. God." "When Standish is reading the weird journal of Isobel Standish, what he reads is very similar to an account of that kind of moment. She sees the hillsides sizzle, things burn and gleam, everything has been plugged into an enormous power source, and it all glows with that power. I'm still trying to work it out. I'm trying to figure out how you integrate ordinary life with that level of perception."

"I don't think it's just imagined. I think what I meant when I said those moments can't be denigrated is that they are full of truth...

what seems to me to be *actual truth*. To forget about it is to be left abandoned in an empty world. I'm not talking about God or religious perception, though it is a perception of the sacred in some sense. I want to write novels, I don't want to write tracts. I don't want to write descriptions of mystical experiences, but I do want that sort of reality to be present. It also seems to me that, interestingly, I want that kind of reality to be present at some of the *worst* moments in life! Some of the moments of real pain, grief, abandonment, and despair. That's where something really interesting happens, and I'm trying to work that out."

These tiny epiphanies, lost in any "quick read," charge Straub's writing and push it into that most nebulous category: Literature. To speak of any modern author as writing "Literature" is to throw him into a class of writer who is too busy being important to be entertaining. Yet Straub works in some middle ground between "popular" fiction and "serious" fiction, and this is what sets him apart. His approach to violence in fiction is to get inside it, to try to understand the underpinnings and the dimensions that aren't normally explored.

"George Bataille wrote a book called *The Tears of Eros: The Relationship Between the Violent and the Sacred*. I bought the book on the spot because I thought *That's it! That's what I want to know about!* And I didn't learn about it from that book. In a way, I want to explore that particular, strange, highly charged conjunction where violence meets the sacred, and it seems to me that you can do that from inside the viewpoint of a really disturbed person, that that is one clear cut way right there to get to that moment. That's where Koko is; that's where various people in the book I'm working on now are, or are heading. It seems to me you might get there in the middle of combat or in any moment of real extremity. If you're stretched far enough, you perceive things not ordinarily within

your range of perception. You hear the 'dog sounds' emotionally. It's available to some people in times of peace. I think there are certain people who are always two feet above the ground, but they don't talk about it. Sometimes, when you meet one of those people you think *Ah, there's somebody who's really in the center of profound experience all the time.* What's disappointing to me about real villains is that they *never* are!

a big big background of shooting stars and sacred presences, and they don't have any backdrop. They have this mean, pitiful little frame."

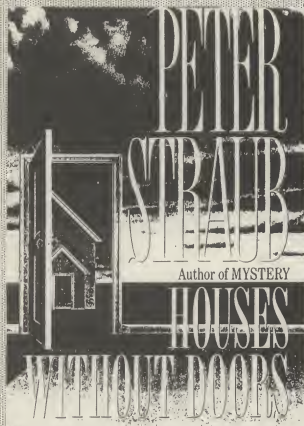
This glory, these perceived realities, are not commonly available to people all the time. Some find it through their religion or faith, while others find it in art. In any art medium (whether it is painting, music, poetry, or prose) there is the potential for these perceptions to become

the feeling inside the person writing the book that this whole world just springs into life, just comes out of artifice into actuality. That's magic. That's what the realistic narrative at its best can do. I also see that in certain early Hemingway, where he described things with such clarity and such lack of excess that it just shines. It's full of feeling, it's full of spirit. And in paintings, Cezanne, Corot, a lot of others, seem charged with the real meaning of the physical world. Writing, in some sense, is supposed to get you to that point. Part of the path to writing is to take out the self, to take out all the mistakes that I would add, and just leave the thing that the book wants to be.

"In the midst of life, you are so focused on what you want to get out of things and you're so distracted by your own subplot and your own needs, that you miss half of what's going on. But if you read it in a book, or if you write it, you should be able to get it all without even really talking about, just by the accuracy of your transcription. This is not a modern notion at all, this is anti-modern."

So many of these elements are present in *Houses Without Doors*: a collection of short-stories and novellas recently published by Dutton. Despite the fact that the pieces were written over many years and are seemingly totally unrelated, the entire book has a thematic unity provided in no small part by the compact, prose-poetry type bridges between each larger story. These bridges call to mind Hemingway's landmark collection *In Our Time*. Indeed, the purity of the language, the almost invisible subtleties of theme, and the transparent prose are worthy of Hemingway, especially in the way they weave seemingly disparate stories into an elaborate, unified tapestry. Hemingway sought to "write the truest sentence I know," and it seems that Straub has as well. The similarity to *In Our Time* is intentional, and Straub's enthusiasm for the book is clear:

"That is, above everything else



Ted Bundy was just like an animal in heat. He had no notion of what he was doing or why, he was like a beast who was hungry. I would like a little more *glory*, a little more *rapture*, in these madmen, but they don't have it. Or they're so disturbed in such crude, stupid ways. Most mass murderers are really dumb. How bright was Henry Lee Lucas? The Romantic angle comes in because I want these people to see everything against

symbolically explicit. "There's something about the process of representation in itself," Straub agrees, "that has to do with valuing the core of experience. Let's talk about my favorite example: Tolstoy. In 'The Buffalo Hunter' Bobby Bunting goes out and buys a copy of *Anna Karenina* and weeps because he sees that at certain moments in that novel the physical world is virtually *created*, it is made so present by the quantity of

Hemingway ever wrote, so beautiful. I only thought about styling *House Without Doors* that way when everything was done, and I bought a little book by Joyce Carol Oates called *The Assignment*, with stories all about a page long. I read two or three of them walking home from the store and it struck me that I could do a kind of Hemingway-esque thing by writing little interludes, like musical interludes, that would thematically connect all the stories. I was tremendously excited by this possibility, and wrote all of the interludes in about two days, starting as soon as I got home from the book store. I vaguely knew what they were supposed to be about, though I had no idea of the content. They just happened. That seemed to me to add another layer to the book and one I was really pleased with. For instance, I could make certain themes explicit, like when the woman sees the man and he's obviously not quite human. He's some supernatural being, an angel or Jesus or something. After all those stories are done she just follows him, and leaves the ordinary world behind. In most of those stories people want to leave the ordinary world behind."

One such person is the young boy in "The Juniper Tree," who represents Timothy Underhill. "The Juniper Tree" is named after the fairy tale by the Brothers Grimm in which a young boy's stepmother grows to loathe him so much that she kills him, chops him up, and buries him under a juniper tree. With the magic inherent in fairy tales, the boy is reconstructed. The same applies to Straub's story, which deals with the reconstruction of the self after trauma. In the boy's case it is an act of child molestation. Through the process of remembering his trauma, dealing with it, he realizes how he's going to be who he is.

The unity of all the stories in *Houses Without Doors* is centered around what Straub calls "trauma and grace; with shock, and what can be made of it. Is imagination expanded or suppressed? What are the

consequences of it being suppressed? That kind of suppression is a reaction to some kind of trauma. You can suppress the trauma, but you have to live with the consequences of the suppression. It's like Bunting [in "The Buffalo Hunter"], who doesn't remember what it is that he almost remembers once. He seems to fly past his parents into the house and the tiger seems to jump out of a lead casket and he says *Uh-uh!* and then slams it right back in. The man in "The Juniper Tree" remembers what that was. Harry Beever's doesn't care if he remembers, he just had fun. There's something in Harry Beever's that does not acknowledge his actions or his own tremendous anger. Because he's never in touch with that anger he does nutty nutty things, and his whole life unreels in this awful pattern. Some people recognize and respond to moments of grace and others don't. Bobby Bunting does. Standish sort of does, but he is so confused and beleaguered by the facts of his wife's infidelity and the abortion he made her have that he goes off the rails.

"There is a way out of a house without a door. It has to do with reconciliation, memory, acceptance; with acknowledging who you are and why you are that person . . . what it was that made you that way, and not running from it or denying it. The image of the house without a door is that of a person walled up within his own habits and preconceptions; his own ideas about his own experience, without any light coming in. Things just go mad in that room. There's no ventilation, because there's no real understanding of the actual dimensions of his own experience."

"The Buffalo Hunter" is clearly Straub's favorite story in the book. "I really felt that I had gotten something new, and that I was getting closer to where I want the rest of my life to go. When Bunting saw Jesus, I said *Ah Ha! I don't know what this means, but it means something!* It certainly pointed to the direction I knew I had to take. After 'The

Buffalo Hunter' my favorite is 'The Juniper Tree.' Now that I adopted Tim Underhill as my alter-ego I have to reckon with the fact that he's a homosexual. That story is one answer."

Now he has embarked upon a project that elaborates on all these themes more consciously and with much more design than in his previous fiction. The next few books, the first of which is a suspense novel called *The Throat* (due out in a year or two), will continue to explore these themes. "The Divided Man [Tim Underhill's novel] seems all over the place in what I've done lately. What I'm doing now is sort of the last stage of that. It's all about the nature of invention or imagination. It's about why certain kinds of stories are told instead of other stories, about the impulses behind storytelling, as well as the more tenebrous material we were talking about before. Tim Underhill turns out to be the main-spring of *Koko*, *Mystery*, *Houses Without Doors*, and *The Throat*. In some sense he is the narrator of all that material, and in some sense it's about his life. All these things are just spun out of his life."

This will be all more obvious in *The Throat*, which Peter calls "a meditation on violence." And, no, the title doesn't mean a slit throat, but, as he explains it, "refers to expression, to song, to the organ through which vibrating air passes that expresses everything we can say. It's like a saxophone in which a column of air vibrates and is altered to create meaning. It's about the passion of expression." He describes it as something like a thriller, but one that will be intensely literary, since it's about writing.

And, he hastens to add, it's also about the violent and the sacred.

The question always arises with Peter Straub as to where he "fits" in the publishers' scheme of things, in their pigeon holes of "genre" and "mainstream." For someone who has managed so successfully to fuse both, it must become frustrating. "I really

don't know where I fit. When *Publisher's Weekly* puts out their list of the new books, they put Anne Tyler, John Updike, and similar writers under the heading "Literature"; and on the "Commercial" side they name me, Michener, Herman Wouk, Steve, Tom Clancy (whom I don't think can write at all) and a whole bunch of other people who are considered all right. They're good plain reading. But this seems to me to be an artificial distinction between the "serious" and the "non-serious." I don't buy it. I want people to read my books, and I would be really unhappy if they stopped buying them and stopped reading them. It would really take something out of me. I'd mourn. I think that all those writers listed as literary writers also want the big audience. They want people to read their books. I think there's a lot of real healthy stuff going on in American Literature, and a lot of really interesting writing. There's no one dominant figure. I think Tom Wolfe would like to be, but it seems to me he's barely a novelist, he's just a really good journalist who worked hard on one book. I would rather read Scott Turow, who came out at the same time and seems to have much more of the real fictional stuff.

I'm very fond of his books."

And inevitably the conversation comes full circle to horror, with which Straub is still strongly identified. Just what does he think is the state of modern horror?

"I have a sense that traditional horror is going through a rough patch now, and that it's harder to sell. As the field ideologically is expanding, the market for 'jump out' books (books in which monsters jump out at you) has shrunk. That may be painful to some authors, but I think in general those authors never amounted to much."

When asked to enumerate his strengths as a writer he is hard put to fill out the list. "I have a great ability to work," he concedes. "An ability just to sit down and do the job. That's essential. Otherwise you never get anything done. I think I'm good at characterization, and I've gotten better at dialogue. But I wish I was better. I wish I were a genius, I'd feel a lot better. I wish I'd written *Anna Karenina*."

Everything changes with time, evolving towards purer, or sometimes just different, forms. And so it is with Peter Straub's approach to the questions of good and evil. Asked to define them, he separates his views

into two periods. "Between 1975 and 1984, I would have said that good has to do with honor, integrity, humor, and courage, and evil is really the absence of these qualities, but that for the purposes of a book one could posit an absolute evil residing in or just outside the world. That made for interesting stories.

"Now it seems that I'm not at all interested in absolute evil. I'm interested in people who *believe* in it, and it's always a problem. Now I think that good is also inherent somehow in the capacity to imagine, and that evil is the denial or suppression of imagination. Violence has to do with dealing with the consequences of that suppression. I think imagination is a creative quality that is in fact intelligence, and which enables us to reckon, in a kind, sympathetic, insightful manner, with other people and the world. Good certainly has nothing to do with following others or adhering to other people's rule, though there are certain broad based rules that an intelligent, good, sympathetic imagination would forbid. Evil is a product of misunderstanding and bad treatment. Which is not to say that I see the world as a friendly or benign place, because I don't."

-- CD

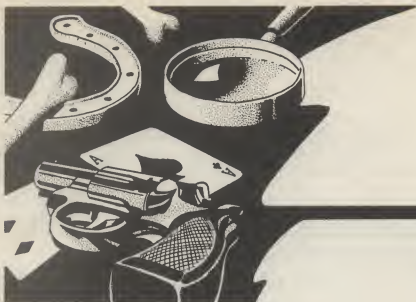
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ED
GORMAN

GORMANIA

"It's not enough that I succeed; my best friend must fail."

While the authorship of this quote seems in doubt (it probably *wasn't* Oscar Wilde, at least not originally), the source of it was undoubtedly a writer because: a) plumbers don't usually get so fancy and b) nobody squabbles quite as much as writers.

Let's start with a little bit of confession.

How many of you writers out there have felt jealous when a friend of yours -- maybe even a very good friend of yours; maybe even your best friend -- has doubled or tripled your last advance?

Pretty awkward moment, isn't it?

On the one hand, you probably really *are* happy for the person because you probably like both him and his writing.

But on the other hand, irrational as it is, you're also probably thinking: why not me? Aren't I as good as he is?

I've been jealous of everything the human animal can be jealous of -- I've wished for that woman, that car, that handsome face, that bulging bankbook and that kind of prestige

and dignity (anybody who would admit to all this obviously doesn't have much dignity, now does he?).

But I thought I'd beaten the rap where fellow writers were concerned.

I was sadly wrong.

A few weeks ago a guy I don't care much for, and a guy I don't think can write for beans, called me full of himself as usual to announce that he'd just gotten a six-figure advance on his next paperback original, on a property that had already earned a heavy movie option and at least two book club deals.

Now you've got to understand something here: it's clear to both of us that we don't like each other and never have. But for some dark reason we continue to batter each other whenever possible.

By calling me, he forced me to not only congratulate him but to pretend I was happy for him.

"God, Rollo, that's great news. Just great." That's what I said.

What I wanted to say was of course quite different: *God, Rollo, who would have thought anybody so utterly devoid of talent could possibly succeed to the degree you have?*

I tried not to let his success ruin the rest of my day; and actually

I did pretty well. His success didn't spoil much more than my next fifteen minutes. (Okay, my next twenty minutes.) Then I got back to work on my own writing.

The Rollos of this world are actually pretty easy to deal with, however. They mean to punish you with their success but they can't really hurt you; not on a personal level anyway. I mean, I don't care if I never hear from Rollo again -- unless he's calling with the news that he's been plagiarizing his books all these years and has just been found out -- and Rollo doesn't care about me. I'm just someone he likes to shadow-box with every once in awhile.

No, the real problem with jealousy is when it affects a relationship you really care about.

Max Allan Collins is one of the best friends I've ever had. For ten years, he's hung in there with me through virtually every kind of experience possible, good and bad alike, from cancer scares to a few major book sales.

I've asked Max (his friends actually call him "Al") if I may relate the following story and he's agreed.

A few years ago, in a way neither of us recognized at first, we began to compete with each other.

I was reviewed well here; Al was reviewed well there. Al got this much for his last book; I got this much. The odd thing about this kind of dead heat mentality was that Al was my superior in every way -- he'd been selling three times as long, was a true innovator (the Nate Heller novels are unlike anything else in detective fiction), and was famous world-wide as the author of the daily "Dick Tracy" strip. But I started letting myself get in competition with him, eager to give him good news, not always sincerely sorry when he gave me bad news of his own in return.

My best friend must fail.

To be honest, I don't recall what brought on our very sudden and open argument, I just know that one terrible afternoon we began some very angry phone sparring and Al, taking the grown-up role that we've been trading back and forth for better than a decade now, said: "If we give a damn about this friendship, Ed, we'd better hang up right now and do some very serious thinking."

These days, after a long interval of not speaking, or speaking coldly, we're better friends than ever.

But I'll tell you something, without wanting, without even knowing I was doing it, I inflicted jealousy on our friendship and thereby nearly destroyed it.

I see and hear this kind of jealously every day. There's a woman mystery writer who sends me lists of

what her friends are getting for advances (a woman I actually like and admire). There's a horror writer who never has a good word for anybody; name a name to him and he's a hack. There's a male mystery writer who constantly sends me letters detailing the alleged sexual practices and drinking/doping practices of my closest friends. Why does he do this? Because he's jealous of them. They're successful and he's not.

There's even a man I admire who scares me. He's nearing fifty and somehow, good writer that he is,

"I saw one man,
he was wounded in love;

I saw another man,
he was wounded in hatred"

— Bob Dylan

he's never been quite the success most people thought he'd be. He's come close a few times but . . . And what used to be his charm, what used to be his wit, what used to be his generosity is now nothing more than poison. And I can't talk to him any longer. I can't take his pain and his rancor.

I'll tell you something: I hope I live out my life being the full-time

writer I am presently. I hope that each year sees me a little better craftsman and a little more of a success. Modest dreams, true, but I'd be willing to forego even those to avoid turning into the green-eyed monster I became with Al Collins. I've been every kind of shit imaginable in my life; but somehow the jealous shit is one of the least attractive of all.

While in some respects we are, I suppose, in competition with each other, we're mostly in competition with ourselves. You may not want to hear this but it's true. Sure, some people get the easy breaks. But most writers who succeed in any significant way get there by pushing themselves a little harder than their friends do. What did Dylan sing? "He not busy being born is busy dying." I read a lot of books by writers who seem to be busy dying; I've even written a few myself.

I don't pretend that jealousy is easy to overcome, or tractable just because we recognize how irrational it usually is.

But as editor of *Mystery Scene*, I hear from many many writers each week, too many of whom are aggrieved by the success of others. I hear the frantic pain in their voices as they relate what so-and-so got for an advance; or which movie studio is turning this or that book into a major feature.

All a writer can do is his own work in the best way he knows how. The rest is in the lap of the gods; those callous sons-of-bitches. — CD



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TOM ELLIOTT is the former publisher/editor of the horror newsletter *AFRAID*. His debut novel, *The Dwelling* (St. Martin's Press) was a final nominee for HWA's Bram Stoker Award, and his short stories are popping up in all the right publications. Elliott's short story -- "Colorado Gothic" -- in my new anthology *COLD BLOOD* is one of the most bizarre and original tales I've ever read. Look for it! And enjoy the following story, too.

Bill straightened and leaned against his shovel; he passed a bare arm across his forehead, and was surprised at the prodigious amount of sweat that clung to the soft blond hairs of his forearm. Far in the distance, Abilene floated in the morning heat like some wavering, enchanted kingdom in the sky. He glanced over at Johnny. "What'd you say?" he asked.

"Fucking assholes," Johnny repeated, then kicked at the drying animal carcass glued to the pavement of Texas Highway 351.

"Who?"

"Cops. I hate 'em. Fuck 'em all."

"Better not let *him* hear you." Bill nodded at the cop sitting behind the wheel of the pickup truck parked a few dozen yards down the road. The cop was stoically smoking a cigarette while he pondered the Saturday funnies.

"Fuck him, too," Johnny said, but with less conviction. "I shoulda took traffic school again."

Bill pried at the edge of the armadillo with his shovel, and it came away from the pavement with a soft slurping sound. He scooped it up and dumped it atop the other stiff bodies already covering the pickup's bed.

"I thought you already took traffic school three times."

Johnny stopped and stared at Bill; he looked indignant, though Bill wasn't sure why. "Yeah," Johnny said finally, "but this--" he indicated the bit of fluff at his feet that had once been a jack rabbit "--this is what they call cruel and unusual punishment." He shoveled it up and dumped it in the pickup.

Bill stared off into the distance. "It's not so bad," he said. "A couple of hours in the fresh air beats hell out of some boring lecture."

"I never liked fresh air," Johnny confessed. "And they give you doughnuts in traffic school." He hesitated, then added, "And the classroom doesn't smell like rotten meat."

Bill nodded. "Got me there."

Together they sat on the lowered tailgate and without a word the cop started the engine and drove slowly down the road's shoulder. Just as they were beginning to enjoy the soft flow of air against their faces, the truck stopped, and Johnny and Bill dismounted with twin sighs of resignation.

"You want the coyote, or the whatever-it-is?"

Johnny considered his choice a moment too long, and Bill headed for the whatever-it-was.

"I'll get the coyote," Johnny said belatedly.

"Right," Bill said, poking at the large flattened whatever-it-was, dried now to the stiff consistency of beef jerky. "Must have been a big dog," he muttered.

The head of the whatever-it-was showed both eye sockets (its eyes long gone) close together, like that halibut Bill had caught once off the Gulf Coast. It was so flat Bill could not picture what it had looked like alive.

His shovel made a metallic scraping sound against the pavement as he edged it under one of the animal's legs. He lifted it a few inches, then froze.

"Johnny," he said breathlessly. "Johnny! Come here!"

Bill inched away from the whatever-it-was. The hairs prickled on the back of his neck.

"Yeah?"

Bill pointed at his discovery, and Johnny looked down.

Folded under the end of the leg Bill had pried up was an even flatter hand, and now it hung limply from the end of the shattered wrist. One of its fingers still retained some of its original plumpness, owing somewhat to the fact that the leg had protected it from further flattening, but more so because of the gold ring.

Johnny crossed himself nervously, mumbling something in Spanish. "Somebody ran over a *kid*, man," he said.

"I don't think so," Bill said, and Johnny's eyes jerked up to stare into his.

"What you mean, man? It sure ain't a dog. Dogs

don't wear fucking rings, man. That's a *human bean*, man."

"I don't think so," Bill repeated. "Count the fingers."

He waited while Johnny counted.

"The others must be around here someplace,"

Johnny said weakly.

"I don't think so."

"Would you stop *saying* that?! *Hijo de la chingada!* 'I don't think so!' 'I don't think so!' 'I don't thin--'"

Bill punched Johnny in the arm. "Shut the fuck up, asshole. You want him to hear us?"

Together they looked over at the pickup; the cop had abandoned the funnies and now seemed completely absorbed with the possibility that a foreign object might have lodged in one of his nostrils.

Johnny rubbed at his shoulder. "Don't go hittin' me, man," he warned.

Bill carefully slid the blade of his shovel under the bulk of the whatever-it-was and levered it over.

They both gasped. Johnny crossed himself again.

A second, smaller head, flattened like the first, peered out of a slot in what appeared to be the thing's belly. The features of this smaller head, however, had been protected by the animal's body from the insults of tire tread, and Bill was able to picture what the thing had looked like in life.

"A baby," Johnny whispered, echoing Bill's thoughts. "It was carrying a baby. In a pouch, like one of them kangaroos or something."

Bill squatted next to the thing and put a trembling hand against the tiny crushed face.

Johnny shoved ineffectually at Bill's shoulder. He looked horrified. "Don't *touch* it, man!" he cried.

Bill adjusted his feet for better balance, and gingerly tugged at the tiny head. For a moment there was some resistance, then the body of the baby emerged with a wet sucking noise.

"I think I'm gonna throw-up, man," Johnny whispered, but Bill ignored him.

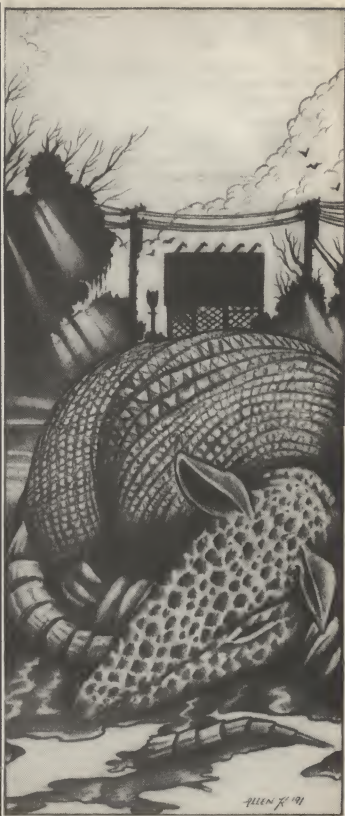
The baby had four pencil-thin arms, and three of its hands were crossed almost reverentially across its tiny chest. Clutched between the delicate fingers of the fourth was a small bit of something that looked like a scrap of cardboard.

Bill pinched the bit of cardboard between his fingers and pulled. It came away with the tiny hand still connected to it.

"Eeeuuu," Johnny said, looking away.

It was a book, about the size of a Crackerjack prize. Bill used a fingernail to open its covers; inside were tiny silvery images of alien scenes and a few odd-looking characters scattered about the pages. Its purpose was clear. *I bet I'm holding the alien equivalent of Horton Hears a Who*, Bill thought.

Without a word, he slipped the tiny book into his



shirt pocket. He glanced up at Johnny; the action was bound to elicit a comment from the man, but Johnny remained silent, his face very pale, his lips quivering.

Bill leaned over and slid his hand fully into the pouch-slit of the mother-thing. The inside of the pouch felt warm and slick, and Bill was reminded of a vagina. Then his fingers brushed against the edge of something hard and circular. He pulled it out.

It was a gold metallic disk, about the size of a CD, and on its center was printed very clearly "Greetings from the People of Planet Earth."

"Oh, Jesus," Bill said.

"Wha--?" Johnny said; he looked like he might cry. "Don't show me no more, man. I can't take it. I really can't."

Bill held the disk up. "Do you know what this is?"

"Yeah," Johnny said. "The Space Cadets cover of 'Purple People eater.' How the fuck should I know, man?"

"You know those rockets they send up every few years, the ones that are supposed to send pictures back of Saturn and shit like that?"

Johnny nodded uncertainly.

"I read in *Penthouse* or somewhere that they put a recording on those rockets. Recordings in all sorts of languages saying 'Greetings from Planet Earth.'" Bill waved the disk in the air, and the Texas sun flickered across Johnny's eyes.

"That's what this is, Johnny. It's one of those disks. From a rocket we shot into space."

"Sounds like bullshit you're making up to me."

"I'm telling you, man. I read it somewhere."

They stared at the disk in Bill's hand for a long moment, then together they looked down at the mother-thing, and at the remains of its child.

"We should tell *him*," Johnny said, indicating the truck.

Bill shook his head. "You think that asshole's gonna know what to do? I thought you hated cops."

"Sure, but hey, man, this is some serious shit."

"You think this is gonna get us off road-kill detail? Man, if we tell him, he's just gonna tell *his* boss, who'll tell his boss, and then the CIA and the FBI and all kinds of government spooks are gonna come down here and turn this into a real circle-jerk."

"And you 'n me, man, we'll be *famous*!"

"We'll be shit," Bill said. "I read an article once about a guy who discovered a spaceship in Arizona a couple of years ago."

"You read too much, man."

"Maybe," Bill said. "Anyway, right after he reported it, he disappeared. Poof. Into thin air." Bill snapped his fingers.

"Maybe the guy owed money and--"

"Maybe shit!" Bill said. "Maybe the CIA and FBI boys decided they needed to talk to this guy *at length* --

you know what I mean? Maybe this guy didn't disappear; maybe he's still alive, sitting in a little room where the CIA and FBI boys can shoot the breeze with him whenever they like."

"No way, man," Johnny said, but Bill thought that the man's eyes were as wide open as they could get. He was getting through.

"Or maybe," Bill continued, "maybe the guy *did* disappear. Maybe he's buried in some Arizona cemetery, with somebody else's headstone over his grave."

"That's fuckin' crazy, man," Johnny said, but his swarthy face was pale.

Bill stood up and -- after a moment's thought -- flung the disk out into the vast expanse of Texas plain. He gave Johnny a warning look, then gripped the handle of his shovel. "Maybe it is," he said, and then he scooped up the mother-thing and its baby, walked over and dumped the load into the back of the pickup.

The dull thud roused the driver from his nasal investigation; he wiped his fingers on his pant-leg and cranked up the engine. "Took you guys long enough," he called back over his shoulder.

"This heat is gluin' the fuckers to the freeway, man," Bill said. He sat on the tailgate and stared pointedly at Johnny, who still stood beside the already-drying spot on the road.

After a moment, Johnny came over and sat beside him with a resigned sigh. "Man, I hate cops," he said. He was silent for a moment. "Hey!" he suddenly called out to the driver. "When we gonna stop for lunch?"

But the driver's response was drowned by the grinding of gears, and the pickup jerked into motion. Grumbling, it moved on down the line.

-- CD

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ON **AMERICAN PSYCHO**

AMERICAN PSYCHO. By Bret Easton Ellis.
Vintage Contemporaries. 399 pp. \$11.00

This is, it would seem, the book your parents warned you about.

Bret Easton Ellis's *American Psycho* has managed to obtain more adverse publicity than any novel in publishing history. First Simon & Schuster cancelled the book on the eve of publication for reasons of taste and the extremity of its depictions of violence against women. Then the *New York Times Book Review* offered an unprecedented "sneak preview" of a purloined manuscript, which termed the novel "loathsome." Norman Mailer vented his moral outrage in *Vanity Fair*, while the *Washington Post* called it "a contemptible piece of pornography." Although Vintage Books, which earlier published Mr. Ellis's first novel, *Less Than Zero*, has now issued the book, it's difficult to find a copy in local bookstores, many of which have declined to display it or have made it available only through special order (and, presumably, in a plain brown wrapper). Ellis-bashing is *de rigueur* among all rightthinking persons, and has become something of a feminist cause.

I respectfully dissent.

"This is no time for the innocent." If the reader endures to reach these words in the closing pages of *American Psycho* -- something equivalent to taking a holiday in Beirut -- this fact has become brutally obvious. Opening these pages creates the feeling that a medical student must have upon first opening the body of a terminal patient: Wonder, disgust, despair, defeat.

Patrick Bateman, the title character (and indeed, the novel's only true character) is a twentysomething yuppie scum -- wealthy, world-weary, and frighteningly fungible. He is forever mistaken for his fellow Wall Street clones, aloft in the Eighties upper caste, equipped with digital and cellular sidearms in their neverending quest for money to be made, and women and drugs and beggars to abuse. Their world is watched over by posters for *Les Misérables* (what else?) and set to a soundtrack of Broadway musicals and vapid rock-and-roll. As his name suggests, Bateman is the new Norman Bates, no longer a shy mama's boy hidden in a backwoods motel,

but a GQ zombie at large on the streets of Manhattan.

Bateman is filled with a nameless dread; like the inhabitants of Mr. Ellis's earlier novels, his cup runneth over with blood: A child of plenty, he walks this world in desperate need... but for what? There are no new drugs, new possessions or emotions, at least not for long. He is not simply a serial killer; his entire existence is serial, an obsessive, episodic regimen of workouts, taxi rides, phone calls, dinners, clubs, more taxi rides -- and, most importantly, the renting and returning of videos: his story is a tape loop, complete with fast forwards and rewinds. Nothing has dimension: "Surface, surface, surface was all that anyone found meaning in..." Bateman's confession is a lame archaeological dig in which brand names are the paramount detail, by which each trendy meal, each shopping spree, each murder is reported in a deadpan, flood-of-consciousness style meant to numb the reader into submission. The medium is indeed the message: in Bateman's mantralike repetition of designer labels, people are defined not by the color of their hair or eyes or their personalities -- for they have none -- but by their suits and ties and shirts and shoes: walking mannikins, less than zombie.

Despite the hype, Bateman is an equal opportunity killer. Most of his victims are random, the targets of convenience -- small animals, children, delivery boys, the homeless, prostitutes, taxi drivers. When it comes to the opposite sex, however, Bateman is wholly predatory, incapable of relating to women save through their sexuality, interested in nothing but total objectification. Violence becomes his only means of expression: "This is my reality. Everything outside of this is like some movie I once saw." Not surprisingly, he insistently tries to create a new kind of movie, enacting ferociously ultraviolent setpieces.

The violence of *American Psycho* is indescribable out of context; one may as well suggest the reading of autopsy reports for entertainment. This book is vile, it is tasteless, it is not politically correct. It is, in other words, a horror novel of the highest order. That is not to say that *American Psycho* is a good book; but no one has ever suggested that, say *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* is a "good" movie, in the sense that film critics or even

suburban moviegoers choose to apply that term. What each (dare I say?) entertainment shares is the temerity to offend and the cupidity to seek an audience that will understand.

This is the Literature of Assault, a kind of literary terrorism that has raged for the past several years in horror fiction, virtually unnoticed by the mainstream, under the sobriquet of "Splatterpunk." Where more civilized fiction strives toward a lilting wake up call to the conscience, "Splatterpunk" is a pure and simple slap to the side of the head. It is the Show Me State of fiction, an effort to shock a society so violence-jaded that it may be unshockable, to understand and use the violence of our times as a means of communication. Thus in its better incarnations these writers are trying, albeit desperately, to reinvent the dialogue between reader and writer, to breathe life into the dying art of the printed word.

Certainly Mr. Ellis has succeeded in creating the most talked about book of the season; whether *American Psycho* is a literary Tar Baby is another question entirely. What is so troubling to his critics is that Mr. Ellis (unlike, say, Stephen King) cannot be discounted as a purveyor of pulp fiction and yet cannot be credited for indulging in its excesses. Forgotten in this equation is the fact that Mr. Ellis is only twenty-six, still young, still maturing, and entitled to err.

The issue confronting each conscientious writer of horror is whether to terrify or terrorize. For Mr. Ellis, as for most Splatterpunks, it is the latter. What is missing from *American Psycho* is a sense of connectedness, of sympathy, of understanding how and why this book should have meaning to most readers. Thus Bateman


admits: "There is no reason for me to tell you any of this." This is of course Mr. Ellis's conceit, and his novel both succeeds and fails in its ultimate sense of futility, its implacably controlled absence of reassurance.

This is not the way in which to win friends or influence people. Reading is an act of complicity, and most readers prefer to be treated as something other than puppies whose faces are thrust into their own excrement. It is thus not surprising that Mr. Ellis should find his audience so reluctant to indulge him.

Those readers who are not put off by the intensity of the imagery will, I suspect, find *American Psycho* tedious; others will no doubt search it through for the naughty bits as surely as a fifties teenager scanning *National Geographic*. But there are no cheap thrills here; in this abattoir could no sane person find a hint of prurience.

Those willing to read carefully and with an open mind will find *American Psycho* hypnotic, discomforting, amusing, apocalyptic, annoying, infuriating: an atrocity exhibition of American artifacts as we slouch toward the coming Millennium. For all of its virtues, all of its faults, it reminds us that when we write about horror, normative terms -- good, bad, art, trash -- are increasingly irrelevant. If fiction is to continue to hold meaning beyond mere entertainment, then is must not simply transcend our daily lives, but on occasion descend into the darkness within and without us. There is thus no reason, and there is every reason, for this story. When all is said and done, there is but a single certainty: Only those who have read this book deserve to say anything at all about it.

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**HANCER'S
PRICE GUIDE TO
PAPERBACK
BOOKS
THIRD EDITION**

Hancer's Price Guide to Paperback Books, Third Edition
by Kevin Hancer

A comprehensive price guide to paperback books published in the United States between 1939 and 1962 and to selected Canadian and post-1962 titles of strong collector interest. Hancer includes everything one needs to know about how to collect, grade, price, buy, and sell paperback books.

This new edition contains a state-of-the-market report, feature articles on Armed Service editions, foreign editions, Edgar Rice Burroughs, Louis L'Amour, and cover artists, and a greatly expanded author cross reference with special emphasis on pseudonyms.

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THE "NOVEL MOVIES" QUIZ

When many well-known (and even not-so-well-known) horror novels are turned into motion pictures, the thought of not retaining the original title would be unthinkable -- e.g. *The Shining*, *Rosemary's Baby* and *The Other* -- or at the very least a portion of the novel's title remains, e.g. *The Haunting (of Hill House)*. But some novel (and occasional novella or novelette) titles simply don't lend themselves to a catchy film title, or -- in cases when a decent title is changed regardless -- a studio big-wig Thinks-He-Knows-Better. At any rate, listed below are nine horror novels/novellas which are better known to movie audiences under the eleven (one work was filmed three times) titles listed to the right. Match up the original works with the filmed version(s); anything over half correct shows that you take the time to look for the *important* credit when a film's credits roll!

- | | |
|---|---------------------------------|
| 1. <i>Black Alibi</i>
by Cornell Woolrich | a. Burn, Witch, Burn
(1962) |
| 2. <i>Burn, Witch, Burn</i>
by A. Merritt | b. Curse of the Werewolf (1961) |
| 3. "Casting the Runes"
by M.R. James | c. Devil Doll
(1936) |
| 4. <i>Conjure Wife</i>
by Fritz Lieber Jr. | d. I Married a Witch
(1942) |
| 5. <i>The Kolchak Tapes</i>
by Jeff Rice | e. The Innocents
(1961) |
| 6. <i>The Midwich Cuckoos</i>
by John Wyndham | f. The Leopard Man
(1943) |
| 7. <i>The Passionate Witch</i>
by Thorne Smith & Norman Matson | g. Night of the Demon
(1958) |
| 8. "Turn of the Screw"
by Henry James | h. The Night Stalker
(1971) |
| 9. <i>Werewolf of Paris</i>
by Guy Endore | i. Village of the Damned (1960) |
| | j. Weird Woman
(1944) |
| | k. Witches Brew
(1980) |

(Quiz answers on page 96)



BOB MORRISH INTERVIEWS DARK HARVEST's PAUL MIKOL

SPOTLIGHT ON PUBLISHING

"Pay no attention to the man behind the curtain."

No matter what the Wizard of Oz might say, there *is* someone important behind the curtain, and we're going to train a big spotlight on them. Specifically, this column is dedicated to "the people behind the presses"-- the individuals who run small press publishing operations. Over the course of the next few issues, we'll take a peek behind the curtain at some of the most important small press publishers in the horror genre. And what better place to start than with Dark Harvest?

Dark Harvest made a fairly inauspicious debut in October of 1983 with a 500-copy printing of a signed, slipcased edition of George R.R. Martin's *Songs the Dead Men Sing*. Since then though, Dark Harvest has gone on to publish 38 more titles, while other small presses have fallen by the wayside by the dozens. Under the guiding hands of co-founders Paul Mikol and Scot Stadalsky, Dark Harvest has become one of the most important small press publishers of horror and dark fantasy.

In the following interview, Mikol explains how Dark Harvest came to be, and describes their plans for the future -- plans which, surprisingly enough, call for Dark Harvest

to deviate a bit from the highly-successful path they've taken to date.

CD: Your first book was George R.R. Martin's *Songs the Dead Men Sing*, which appeared in late 1983. When did you actually start planning for, or working towards, that book?

DH: Scot and I had talked about it for maybe a year or two before that. Scot actually came to me and showed me a copy of the limited edition *Fires-tarter*, which he had bought. And he said 'this is really pretty. Don't you think that we could do something like this?' And it was like 'nah.'

But the more we thought about it, and the more that we looked into it, the more that we thought yes, we might be able to do it. We really did the George Martin book as a one-shot deal. We never expected to stay in the business.

CD: Although the dust jacket on the Martin book makes a reference to more books in the future.

DH: Well, it was either put that on there or say 'here today, gone tomorrow.' We really weren't *sure* what we were going to do. At that

time (when the Martin book came out), we had nothing else lined up. We had some grand ideas, like every other small press. We thought that we would take the world by storm, and that the New York publishing world would sit up and say 'God, after just one book, we *have* to buy them out for like ten million dollars.'

But we really had no concrete plans of where we were going to go with this.

CD: But you had two books -- Alan Ryan's *Cast a Cold Eye* and *Night Visions I* -- come out in 1984, so you must have put those two together pretty quickly.

DH: Yeah. We came up with the idea of the *Night Visions* series while we were working on *Cast A Cold Eye*, and since we were new to the field, and since we were already working with Alan, we just asked him to edit the first volume.

CD: A couple more questions about the first book, the George R.R. Martin title -- did you have a hard time convincing Martin to work with you, considering the fact that you were unknowns at that time?

DH: Actually, no. George is one of the easiest-going guys I've ever met. He's extremely accessible, and he did not make us feel like nobodies, even though we had no track record at all.

CD: Did you select Martin as the first author you would publish because he was a personal favorite?

DH: There were a lot of things that went into the decision. We came up with a list of authors that we thought would be accessible -- which is something we still do today. It's the easiest thing in the world to say 'you should do a Stephen King book, or you should do a Robert Heinlein book.' Well, sure, but forty thousand other publishers think the same thing. The trick is in finding someone who's accessible and who may have that kind of popularity if their book is presented right.

A lot of other small presses do seem to just go with personal favorites, with no thought to marketability. We try to balance our own personal taste with the question 'will it sell?' Because if the books don't make money, you can't stay in business. That's a sad fact of life.

CD: How did you come up with the name Dark Harvest and your distinctive tree logo?

DH: Scot and I came up with it. We went through several different names, and we asked everybody we knew for suggestions, then we came up with a list of finalists, and . . . we basically had too much to drink and made a decision.

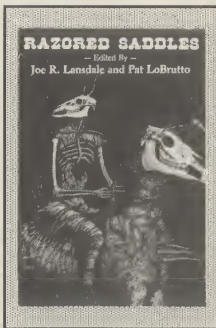
As far as the logo, we originally thought of doing a spooky-looking cornfield, to go with the Dark Harvest name, but that would've been too complex to stamp on a spine of a book or anything like that. So we decided to go with the simplified tree logo.

CD: In Dark Harvest's early years, you published a couple of books by

science fiction authors -- David Brin and John Varley. The only science fiction books you've published since then have been the two *Chronicles* books, collecting Fritz Lieber and Isaac Asimov, which are kind of special cases. Why did you publish the Brin and Varley books in the first place and why have you since moved away from science fiction?

DH: At that time, both Scot and I collected a lot of science fiction, and occasionally went to conventions. It (SF) seemed like a natural direction for us to go in.

I wish that we could do both of



those books over again, because both of the authors involved deserved better finished product. We were still very young and didn't know what we were doing, and were experimenting a lot -- and the end product just wasn't right. I feel bad for both of those guys, but they were both incredibly understanding and very polite.

CD: Speaking of the *Asimov Chronicles* and *Lieber Chronicles* books, are there more books planned in the *Chronicles* series?

DH: No. We had planned to keep the

series going, but the books are just flat-out too expensive. The books are physically too large. They're really neat projects, and there are a couple of authors I'd still love to do, but the economics of it make it very, very difficult.

CD: On the average, how many copies of a trade edition do you print these days?

DH: It varies, but on the average . . . we probably run around 5,000.

CD: What's the biggest print run you've ever had?

DH: The biggest would have been the Dean Koontz books. The last one, *Shadowfires*, topped out at right around 12,000 copies.

CD: Does the size of your print runs matter at all when you go to talk to a mass-market publisher about paperback rights?

DH: No, I haven't found that anybody has ever even asked that question.

CD: How many people do you have working at Dark Harvest now?

DH: We have . . . probably six or seven people off-and-on who do various things. I'm the one who usually gets talked to, but without Scot Stadalsky and without my wife Ann, there's no way anything would ever get done around here.

CD: You've been doing this for eight or nine years now. Do you plan on continuing in the publishing business for the foreseeable future?

DH: I hope so. We're planning on it at this point. Both Scot and I do this full-time now. In the early years, we both kept our regular jobs, and this was a glorified hobby. But then about three years ago, I quit my regular job, and about a year later, Scot quit his. And the operation requires our

full-time attention now.

At one point, I knew all of our customers and I knew all of their orders, but now that's just impossible.

CD: Are the other four or five people involved with Dark Harvest besides yourself and Scot full-time also?

DH: Yeah, I would say that they're all more or less permanent part-time employees.

CD: I know you got married recently. Has that affected the amount of time you can spend on Dark Harvest?

DH: To be honest, it's made it easier because my wife did odd jobs for us before -- the garbage work that nobody else wanted to do, stuffing envelopes and so forth. Since we've been married, since I don't drop her off at home and that sort of thing, we get more work done, since all the work is here and we're both here to do it. We're also doing a lot better now with keeping lines of communication open with our customers, and responding to calls and so forth.

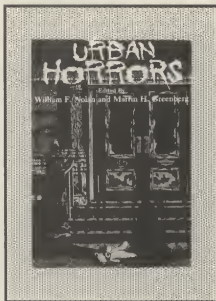
CD: If there's one negative thing that's been said about Dark Harvest, it's that you sometimes have real annoying problems with typos and copy editing. First, do you think that's a valid criticism, and second, do you think that occurs because of rushing to meet schedules or for some other reason?

DH: Well, of course, I think the comments are totally without credence and are obviously made by jealous, back-biting people who just like to sling mud at anyone.

No, that's a joke. I would have to agree. I think that the proofreading part of the operation is the most tedious and the most difficult one to do, and everybody likes to point fingers at everybody else. The way we do it is when the type comes back from the printer, the author proofs it once and we put his corrections in,

and then we proof it two more times before it goes to press. And the mistakes *still* manage to creep in. If anybody has a suggestion on how we might do it better, please drop me a line, because it really bothers me that no matter what we do, they seem to creep in. It's one of the things we're really trying to clamp down on.

CD: While I've got you on the spot, let me ask you a couple of other rather direct questions. I was surprised when I saw the contents of *Urban Horrors*, since it was an all-reprint anthology, which was a first for you. I found it to be probably the most unremarkable thing that Dark Harvest has done. What led to the publication of that book?



DH: We looked at it, and the weird mix of stories in the table of contents, along with the fact that the stories were not ones that had been reprinted over and over again -- those two things sold us. Whenever we're looking at an anthology, it really comes down to the authors involved with it. And for every one anthology we do, I bet we're offered six or eight, because there's a massive glut. Everybody and his cousin out there has an anthology to pitch.

To be honest, *Urban Horrors* sold really well for us, even though it was

all reprints.

CD: I noticed last autumn that you missed by about two or three days getting the Dan Simmons collection *Prayers For Broken Stones* out in time for the World Fantasy Convention. Was that due to production problems?

DH: Well, the Simmons book was not advertised as going to be available at the Convention. It was due out the month after the convention, but we pushed and we got it out as soon as we could.

There's really no advantage one way or the other in getting a book out for a convention, unless of course, you're doing a Convention Book for them -- which we did one year with *Black Wine*, when Charlie Grant and Ramsey Campbell were the Guests of Honor. But really, it doesn't affect sales.

CD: Speaking of conventions, I remember standing next to you in 1987 as you finalized a deal with Dennis Etchison for him to be in *Night Visions 7* -- a deal which obviously later fell through. So my question is: what kind of anecdotes can you tell me about book deals that have fallen through?

DH: We pretty much don't take it to the contract phase unless we think it's going to go through. Once in a while, we just have logistical problems with somebody. We... have to keep in mind that we are a small specialty press -- if somebody gets a \$200,000 contract from a major publisher, we certainly understand where we come in the food chain. If somebody gets a deal like that, we are never going to stand in their way and say 'oh no, you signed here first, you've got to do this before you do the other one because that's protocol.' That's pretty much bullshit, because we are not going to continue to get high profile authors unless we continue to accommodate them as much as we can.

CD: I seem to recall that at one point both Etchison and Chelsea Quinn Yarbro were slated to be in *Night Visions* 7. Have they been moved to a later volume, or have they fallen out of your plans altogether?

DH: We had problems that we just . . . decided it was easier not to pursue it with either one of them.

CD: I think I also heard at one point that you were going to do a Rick Hautala book.

DH: Right, we were planning to do *Dead Voices*. We had pursued it with Warner, who did the paperback, but the negotiations just dragged on and dragged on. What they wanted basically boiled down to 'you can go ahead and do the book, but we're going to make sure that you aren't successful with it.' It dragged on so long that we couldn't get it out in time to beat their paperback release, so we had to pull the plug on it.

CD: In view of the fact you've done two Ray Garton books (*Crucifix Autumn* and *Methods of Madness*), not to mention featuring him in *Night Visions* 5, I can't help but wonder if you had a chance to bid for some of his recent and forthcoming small press titles -- namely *The New Neighbor* from Charnel House and *Trade Secrets*, *Lot Lizards* and the hardcover edition of *Live Girls* from Mark Ziesing.

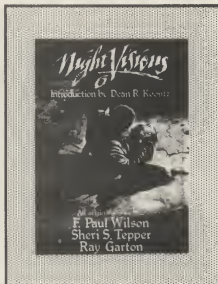
DH: The Charnel House book I was very surprised at, because I had had conversations with Ray's agent Lori Perkins at one time, and I knew that the novel was pending. This was probably a year ago, and I expressed interest at that time. I told Lori that we'd be very interested in it when he finished it -- and if they were interested in having a limited edition, please contact us. But then I never heard anything back from her and I was surprised to see it announced from Charnel House. Obviously, I don't know what Charnel House paid

for it, but we didn't even have an opportunity to make a counter-offer for it or anything like that.

Trade Secrets was kind of on again, off again. We had looked at it a long time ago and said 'thanks, but no thanks' -- but then we thought about it and said, 'well, maybe.' But things stalled and it just never happened.

As far as I know, *Lot Lizards* was done specifically for Ziesing. I don't think that was out there and available for anybody else, but I could be wrong.

As far as *Live Girls*, I had talked



to Ray about that a long time ago, when we were putting together *Crucifix Autumn*, but nothing concrete was discussed. It was more along the lines of me saying 'I really liked that book. Maybe someday . . .' I guess Mark Ziesing came along and said 'I really want to do it, here's a contract.' Which is good, because it's still one of my favorite books.

CD: Are there any particular authors who you haven't had a chance to publish yet that you'd really like to publish?

DH: Hmm . . . one of my favorite authors is Theodore Sturgeon, but obviously he's dead. Were he still alive, he's one guy that I would have liked to have published.

We have been really fortunate to

have had the opportunity to work with almost everybody who's anybody, so offhand I can't think of too many people that we've missed.

CD: One person that I would think of as being a perfect fit for *Night Visions* is David Schow.

DH: Well, he edited *Silver Screams* for us, so we have kind of worked with Dave.

CD: Yeah, but I was referring more to having him write for you, rather than edit.

DH: Well, we try to . . . pay attention to what's going on in the field and try to stay abreast of what everybody's doing and I don't really count anybody out if we would get the right manuscript.

What we're looking at more and more is . . . we're not getting out of the horror field, but we're shifting our emphasis, for lack of a better phrase. We're looking more and more at mystery and dark suspense, because I really feel that dark suspense is about to break wide open the way that science fiction did in the '70s and horror did in the '80s. The new guys coming along in horror, there's not enough of them coming, fast enough, to really support the field. And it's not just my opinion. If you talk to a lot of people, they're kind of disappointed in the way horror has gone over the last couple of years. I think you're going to see, in the next two or three years, 75% of the small specialty bookstores, 75% of the small specialty presses, and quite a few of the horror genre authors are going to be out of it, because it's just going very poorly right now. And we think that dark suspense is where it's going to be at for the '90s.

Personally, I love reading horror stories, but there haven't been that many good ones published lately.

CD: There certainly has been a lot of talk lately about horror being a very

depressed market, and of many major publishers getting out of the horror genre. Have you seen any evidence of a downturn in your own sales or in any other measurable way?

DH: We've been lucky. I haven't seen it reflected in sales so much here, but horror I do think is very depressed right now. If you talk to the major New York publishers, it's really not going well at all -- advances are down, and all that sort of thing. It's not going anywhere and everybody wants to point fingers, but what I think it basically comes down to is that the quality stories just aren't being produced, and the consumer is getting to the point now where they're not buying the books. Even the people who go to lots of conventions and buy everything they find that's labeled horror, even they're starting to look for something else to read, because even they cannot absorb all the bad writing that's been done. And that's why we've been looking beyond the genre.

CD: I understand Joe and Karen Lansdale are editing a forthcoming anthology for Dark Harvest entitled *Dark At Heart*. Is that one of your 'dark suspense' titles?

DH: Exactly. That's the kind of thing that we're going to be doing, and you know, it's not a big leap -- you're not asking the readership to go from reading a vampire novel to reading a romance. There's a real subtle difference between a dark suspense and a horror book. Structurally, they're very similar, and the tone of them is very similar. It's just that some of the writers may not be as familiar as the big horror names.

We've been reading extensively in the mystery and dark suspense fields, trying to decide where we should go and what we should do and who we should approach, and . . . it's great. It feels like it did seven years ago when we were first trying to make a name for Dark Harvest in horror.

CD: When I hear the term 'dark suspense,' I'm never sure how exactly to define it. Does it translate to non-supernatural horror thrillers, or what?

DH: Horror is almost too limiting a term (as part of the definition). Dark suspense, I think, encompasses a whole lot more; it runs the entire spectrum. If you've ever read Joe Lansdale's *The Nightrunners*, which we published -- that could be considered a dark suspense book because the only supernatural element is the God of the Razor, and you're never quite sure if that's real or if it's in the guy's head, or what. The classic example of what I'm talking about is Thomas Harris's *Red Dragon*. That's the type of book I'm talking about.

One that we have coming up that is a great example is a book called *Sibs* by F. Paul Wilson, which should be out later this year. It really bridges many genres. It's a criminal police procedural, it's a great mystery, it has bizarre supernatural elements to it, it's a love story, I mean, it's everything but a cookbook.

This year, we also have the anthology *Dark At Heart* coming out, which has a novella by David Morrell to anchor it, and stories by Wilson, Vacchs, Lansdale . . . We have another one, *Invitation To Murder*, which is being edited by Gorman and Greenberg for us. That's another original anthology. All the writers involved with it start off with the same premise: the protagonists enter their apartment and there's a young woman dead on the floor. And they take it from there and they do whatever they want with it. It was interesting to see what all the writers did with that premise.

CD: Now, is *Invitation to Murder* a different book from the one that I heard that Gorman and Greenberg were going to be doing, namely a sequel to *Stalkers* called *Slashers*?

DH: I believe they were going to do

Slashers through NAL as a paperback, and I don't know if that project ever took off.

CD: In addition to the books you've mentioned, what else do you have coming out in the future. I think I've seen mention of both the second book in F. Paul Wilson's *Reborn* trilogy, *Reprisals*, as well as a hardcover version of McCammon's *They Thirst*.

DH: Right, the McCammon book should be out at the end of April.

CD: And *Night Visions 9*.

DH: Right, with Rick Hautala, Jim Kisner, and Thomas Tessier.

CD: And I think I heard something about a Kisner novel?

DH: That's not this year, that's '92. In talking to Jim about *Night Visions 9*, he told me about this really, really off-the-wall idea that he had for a vampire novel that takes place in the Midwest. The idea was great, and he's working on that right now.

CD: Anything else upcoming?

DH: Umm . . . nothing else that's definite. We're always looking for new projects, and there are things we're talking about now, but there's nothing signed.

CD: You mentioned earlier that when you first started out, you had some grandiose dreams of being acquired for big bucks by a major New York publisher. Have you ever had serious talks with anyone about an acquisition?

DH: I wouldn't say serious. People throw out things now and then, and you hear things from time to time, but nothing that I would take seriously.

— CD

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RAZOR CUT

JOHN MACLAY

JOHN MACLAY has been a writer, poet, editor, and publisher since 1980. He has sold two novels and over 100 short stories, including appearances in *Stalkers*, *Masques*, *Twilight Zone*, *Night Cry*, and *The Horror Show*. MacLAY's prose is razor sharp and deadly -- just like the following tale!

Black spandex tights, top to match, motorcycle boots, studded leather jacket. Eye makeup, perfume, gum. Eighteen now, braless breasts swelling, ass jiggling, could have been a centerfold. Out of high school, still lives at blue-collar home, works a lottery machine. But evenings spent on cold city streets, with her "weird" friends. And the heavy metal music. And the haircut.

Black, shaggy, long on top. A little tail, held by a 14-karat clip. But neck and sides shaved high, concentration camp look. Has to have it done once a week, keep it right.

There's a men's barber downtown who will do it. Old guy, tall, lean, bald, white tunic, the works. Shop has ancient chairs, sinks, bottles, tile floor, ceiling fans. Few customers now, works alone, everybody goes to stylists.

Uses a straight razor, though, the best. Strops it on leather, mixes up the soap in an antique china cup, brushes it on. Really knows how to wield that four-inch sliver of steel.

"Ya know," she says one day, between chews on gum. Looking down at white bib and her new-shined boots. "Gotta trust you, something like this. Hitler had somebody hold a gun at his barber's head when he got shaved."

"Well," he replies. Razor swishes, nice clean feeling on neck. Blade wiped on cloth, held poised for another swipe. "I may be old, but my hand is sure."

The sides now. Edge over hard skull, icky sensation. Strokes still true though, like a lover's fingers. Shiver down spine, even between legs. Something about a haircut.

"Think I look good?" she asks, wondering why. Swell of breasts under bib, barber's belly against her arm. "I mean, the style?"

"Well," comes the smiling voice. "I think I'll reserve judgement on that."

Swish, swish. Now a twinge. Lump in throat under tight-clipped bib, held prisoner. Silly. Could jump off

chair any time, run to the street. Silly. Forget razor, look out plate glass window. Almost done anyhow.

And it is. Tap on shoulder, clip removed, pressure released. Fingers on neck, tingle again, but only smelly aftershave. Female body rising, while he rinses blade and hands in sink. Reach in purse, pay up.

"Looks good," she says, checking it out in the mirror.

He takes her in. "Perhaps it does, Missy. Perhaps it does."

Out the door. Boots click on sidewalk. Getting dark, chill in air. Guys watch as she passes, eyes follow spandexed ass. Smacks gum, warns them off. Around the corner, over a couple of blocks, to the coffee shop. Cheryl and Wanda there, she slides onto a stool.

"Neat haircut."

"Yeah."

"Thanks. Hey. Like, ya think old guys can . . . do it? I mean, real old guys?"

Brows furrow. "Yeah, I guess. They still got a joint, it still gets stiff. Why?"

Tough giggles. Frown from woman behind the counter.

"Dunno. Something that happened at my haircut."

Blank stares. "Hell, it's just a haircut."

"Yeah."

All next week, working lottery machine, cashing the few winning tickets for the people. Sitting on high stool, studded leather jacket draped on back. Evenings with Cheryl and Wanda, Friday night with Ron. Dark club cellar, second-hand couch. Lie back, shuck off boots and black cloth, get down to it. Sure the rubber's on, let him inside.

Hair, she thinks, sighing. Ron's is down to his shoulders, tenting their faces. God, why about hair?

Knows it, next morning. Her haircut, the old barber. Has let it slide, due yesterday, have to wait until Monday. Keeping away from that straight razor. Why?

And this time, he nicks her.

In the chair, held by the bib. Same attraction, same fear. Swish, swish. Blade on skinhead, fingers. Palms sweat.

Nick!

"Ohhhh!" And my God, her stomach sinks . . . her juices flow.

Cover it with anger. "Hey, watch it. Right on the side of my head, damn it. That'll show."

"Sorry," he replies, rubbing. Cloth comes away with dab of lather, fleck of blood. "That's never happened before. Nerves, perhaps."

Losing it, though. Ass shifts in chair, breasts heave, looks him in the eye. "What is this, anyhow?" she spits. "Got me alone, your gut always touching -- you in love, maybe?"

Old eyes stare back, unfathomable. "I don't know, Missy."

She softens then. "Well, that's okay. Nothing to be ashamed of. Circumstances were right, I could even take you on."

Shocked look. "Oh, no. You're so young, so full of life..."

"But you do want something."

Razor poised. "Yes, Missy, I suppose so."

"Okay, then finish me off. Finish my haircut."

Hand steady again, he does.

"... Really weird," she tells Cheryl and Wanda.

Shows the red nick on her head. "Something happening. Think he disapproves? Think I led him on? Feel like not going back there."

But the next Friday, she does.

Plate glass window, old-fashioned shop inside. Barber sitting in his own chair, reading a newspaper. Sees her coming, steps down, ushers her in. Shakes out cloth, fastens it around.

"You okay today? Not gonna nick me?"

"Oh, no, Missy. No."

Slap of leather as he strops the straight razor. Motion of hand as he mixes the soap. Her leather jacket hanging on a hook. Kinky, really. Find stuff to notice, kick back the fear. And the other thing.

"Uh, I didn't mean it, last time." Gives him a sweet smile. "About taking you on, and all."

"Of course not." He smiles back. "I'm old, you're young. Full of life."

Into the haircut now. Behind her. Edge glides in long, sure strokes. No problem. Silly to be afraid. The sex part, too. Just the nice clean feeling. Could even nick her once or twice a year, comes with the territory. No point waiting for it. Even slash back of neck, nothing vital *there* --

Find stuff to notice. Barber pole outside, downward spiral. Did other things here, in the old days. Red on white on red on...

A rush. Something from his mind to hers. Something that's AWFUL...

"NO!"

She only sees the hand.

And the white bib turn red, as it all drains away.

— CD





TYSON BLUE

NEEDFUL KINGS & OTHER THINGS

Beginning in this issue, my regular column of Stephen King news moves from its original home in *The Blood Review* here to the pages of *Cemetery Dance*, and longtime followers of the column will note that a few changes have been made. We'll get to those in just a minute, but first, for those among you who have not read this column before, a little background is in order.

Late in 1989, as *Castle Rock: The Stephen King Newsletter* was nearing the end of its five-year run, editor Christopher Spruce spoke with King and his secretary, Shirley Sonderegger, and all agreed that with the demise of the newsletter, there remained the need for a place for readers to turn to to get the most up-to-date information available concerning King's forthcoming books, limited editions, films, videotapes, and audiotapes based on his work, personal appearances, magazine appearances and so on.

At about the same time, I spoke with Shirley and Chris and expressed the same opinion, and volunteered to do the job. Since I had agreed to do a sort of freewheeling informational column for *Midnight Graffiti* the previous May, that was the initial venue for the King news. But when Ruben Sosa Villegas contacted me about writing for *The Blood Review*, I decided to do a strictly King-re-

lated column for his magazine, and "Needful Kings," which takes its name from the title of King's next novel, was born.

And now, for a number of reasons, primarily a desire to bring the column to a larger audience, I have decided to move the column to its new home here.

The biggest change in the column is reflected in its new subtitle. Along with the regular Stephen King news, I will be passing along additional information about the works of other authors which would, I think, interest you. This was a direction in which *Castle Rock* was moving at the time of its demise, and that's why I have decided to continue the practice here. The result will be a sort of hybrid column similar to my "Blue Notes" feature for *Midnight Graffiti*, but I will avoid overlaps whenever possible. And now for the news...

We can now give you the first reliable, detailed information about this year's most-anticipated King project. *The Dark Tower III: The Waste Lands* will be published in hardcover by Donald M. Grant on or about May 31, 1991. Plans now call for the book to be issued in a hardcover limited trade edition of 40,000 copies, retailing for \$38.00. In addition, the book will be available in a slipcased, signed deluxe edition, signed by King and artist Ned Da-

meron, and limited to 1,200 copies priced at \$120.00. Eight hundred of the limited editions will be offered first to those who have purchased the deluxe editions of the two previous *Dark Tower* books. Any unpurchased volumes from that group will be placed, along with the remaining 400 volumes, into a pool to be sold by lottery, as with previous entries in the series. More information will be forthcoming as the publication date nears.

1991 promises to be another active year for Stephen King fans, with a variety of new material available both from King and his adapters. Last year saw the release of the special "Stephen King Issue" of *The Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction*. A number of special features appeared, including two pieces of fiction -- the first is a new short story, "The Moving Finger," about a man who finds a disembodied finger lurking in the drain of his bathroom sink. This tongue-in-cheek story reminds me a lot of King's earlier story, "Sneakers," for some reason... maybe the locale...

The second, "The Bear," is a semi-self-contained excerpt from the beginning pages of *The Dark Tower III: The Waste Lands*. Also included is a critical appreciation of King by regular *F&SF* critic Algis Budrys, as well as new photos, a King bibliogra-

phy, which is useful but not complete by a long shot, and a special cover by Anita Kunz.

Edward and Audrey Ferman, the publishers of the magazine, informed us that this is the first special issue of the magazine devoted to a single author since their special Harlan Ellison issue in July 1977. Cover-dated December 1990, the magazine shipped in October and hit the stands November 1. A limited-edition version of the issue is also in the works; contact the magazine for further information.

While you're waiting for *The Waste Lands*, you might want to check out the April '91 issue of *Ladies Home Journal*, which features an article in which a number of writers, including King, reveal their favorite books from their childhoods. Just in case you can't find it or can't wait, King's favorite was *McElligott's Pool*, by Dr. Seuss.

If you have a well-stocked bookstore in your neighborhood, you might try to find the Spring Announcements Issue of *Publishers Weekly*, which features a four-page article about King entitled "King of Horror." The article, written by Bill Goldstein, appears to rely heavily on a fairly recent interview with King, and features quotes from agents, publishers and others as well, on such topics as his success, his wish for critical respectability, his down-to-earth facade in the face of enormous popularity, the power of his writing, and a few more tantalizing hints about the upcoming *Needful Things*. There's not an awful lot of new information here for the true King aficionado, but it is a good article nonetheless.

An expanded version of King's essay, "The Dreaded X," an anti-censorship piece which originally ran in *Castle Rock*, will appear in an updated version in the second annual issue of Barry Hoffman's trade paperback *Gauntlet*, which will also, surprise, surprise, be available in a signed, limited edition from Borderlands Press. For price and ordering

information, contact Hoffman at 309 Powell Road, Springfield, PA 19064.

On the film front, Rob Reiner's film version of *Misery*, starring James Caan as Paul Sheldon and Kathy Bates as Annie Wilkes, was a major Christmas release by Columbia Pictures, remaining in the top ten on into the new year. Director Reiner changed the story significantly, eschewing the graphic violence of the novel for a psychological battle of wits between the two main characters. Although this was disturbing to many fans -- including this one -- the scenes which replaced them proved to be just as effective, at least among the audiences with whom I saw the film. I should have known better than to worry, I guess, since Reiner did direct the best King film to date, *Stand By Me*.

Misery garnered critical raves and a Golden Globe for Bates's performance, and she eventually received an Oscar for the role, unfortunately the film's sole nomination. This makes *Misery* the first King film to win an Academy Award, and it is already more honored than any previous King-related project.

King has written a new screenplay titled "Sleepwalkers," although at presstime, King's office was unable to confirm that it was written for any particular production entity, although it was stated that it was *not* done for Laurel Productions.

The film version of King's short story "Graveyard Shift" was filmed in Maine under the production and direction of Ralph Singleton, who was executive producer on "Another 48 Hours." Filming was done in and around Bangor and neighboring Brewer, with the mill scenes done at the Barlett Yarn Mills in Harmony. Starring are David Andrews, Kelly Wolf, Stephen Macht and Brad Dourif. Paramount distributed the film as a Halloween release, and although it did a respectable opening-week business, it soon faded from sight.

CBS will debut "The Golden Years," a mini-series scripted by King,

in July. Not much is known about the project, except that Laurel is producing, and that it could develop into a series should viewer response be strong enough. Stay tuned to this spot for more news as it becomes available.

It seemed for a short while that readers who wanted to read King's early "King's Garbage Truck" columns might have a chance to do so. The University of Maine had planned to issue at least some of the columns as part of a book of collegiate writings by famous alumnae, but those plans hit the skids when King's attorneys took steps to bar the publication. Newspaper reports of the events said that King was embarrassed by this early work, considering it juvenile.

Having read these columns during my research for *The Unseen King*, I would have to agree with King that some of the columns might be a little puerile or sexist. However, that is far outweighed by the huge number of images and themes which appear in these columns which turned up later in novels and short stories. They really do make fascinating reading, and it's a shame that they won't be made more widely available.

As the new year cranks up, there are a couple of new King items for your enjoyment. The biggest news is the release of a major new audio package.

Back in November, Penguin/HighBridge Audio released *One Past Midnight: The Langoliers*, the first in a series of four audio releases which, when completed this Fall, will make all of *Four Past Midnight* available in unabridged audio editions.

The Langoliers is contained on six cassettes, with a total running time of eight hours, 41 minutes. It is read by Willem Dafoe, who does a creditable job on most of the story, although a couple of the voices he uses for the characters seem a little off to me. There is a smattering of background music here and there,

but no sound effects. This should be pleasing to King, who told me once that he prefers adaptations of his work to be presented without background sounds of any kind.

In February, 1991, the company released *Two Past Midnight: Secret Window, Secret Garden*, the second book in the series, which is read by James Woods. This will be followed in May by *Three Past Midnight: The Library Policeman*, slated to be read by Ken Howard. No reader has as yet been selected for the final story, *Four Past Midnight: The Sun Dog*.

The March 1991 issue of *Fangoria*, the special 100th issue, contains a number of items which will be of interest to King fans. First off, there is a short interview with King himself, one of the few new interviews in some time. He talks a bit about why he likes the magazine, about the upcoming versions of *The Dark Half*, *Thinner* and *The Stand*, and the possibility of *Creepshow III* being produced as an animated feature from Ralph Bakshi.

In addition, King figures prominently in two other articles in the issue. The lengthy "History of Horror" section features an article entitled "Words That Haunted You," in which Douglas E. Winter surveys the growth of the horror novel over the last few years.

And finally, the magazine features an interview with George Romero, which focuses mainly on his recently-remade *Night of the Living Dead*, but does talk some about the just-finished Orion release of *The Dark Half*. The film, by the way, stars Timothy Hutton, Amy Madigan, Julie Harris, and Michael Rooker.

An even bigger treat may be found in the February 1991 issue of *Cinefantastique*, probably the best magazine covering the genre-film scene today. The issue takes advantage of the release of *Misery* to produce what amounts to a special "Stephen King" issue, containing no less than six feature-length articles

about King and the films based on his work.

Along with in-depth coverage of *Misery*, the issue features articles on all of the films made of King's work since *Carrie*, a look at the filming of *The Dark Half*, the upcoming film version of *The Stand*, and a particularly interesting story about the aborted film version of "Apt Pupil," which stopped filming in mid-production. Another unseen King project, "The Shotgunners," is also covered in some detail.

Also included is a brief biographical article by Stephen Spignesi, featuring seldom-seen photos of King in his younger days. The article is also interesting in that it presents evidence which indicates that the germ for *Misery* existed in King's mind for a much longer time than has previously been thought.

Salted throughout the longer articles is information gleaned in what was obviously a fairly substantial interview with King conducted by writer Gary Wood, the most surprising revelation of which is that King has rethought his previously-expressed determination never to direct again. What project might get him behind the camera again is not revealed, but he is definitely interested in doing it again. He does, however, say that he had always been saving *Misery* for himself to direct, until Rob Reiner came along.

For further information, pick up the magazine at your local bookstore or write *Cinefantastique* at P.O. Box 270, Oak Park, IL 60303.

European readers, or those who speak German, will be interested in an interview with King which will run in *der Stern*, a German newspaper.

King's office reports that, once more, there is no new project forthcoming from King's publishing company, Philtrum Press. His ongoing novel-in-progress, *The Plant* is on indefinite hold, and the only Philtrum product currently available is Don Robertson's novel *The Ideal, Genuine Man*, which features an

Introduction by King, and is still available in a signed, numbered edition signed by both King and Robertson. The book shouldn't be missed -- contact Philtrum Press in Bangor, Maine, for further information.

Those of you who are relative newcomers to King's work, or who may wish to get hardcover editions of earlier works which were first purchased in paperback will be interested in a new program from the Book-of-the-Month Club called the "Stephen King Library." The program is being heavily promoted both inside and outside the club, and BOMC membership is not a requirement to belong.

The introductory offer for the library is a tempting one -- they are selling *The Stand: The Complete, Uncut Edition* for \$6.95 plus shipping, with no obligation to buy any further books. If you choose to stay aboard, the club will ship you a new book every seven weeks for \$14.95. The entire set consists of 23 hard-bound volumes, and will be supplemented by new King books as they are published -- in fact, the club promises delivery of new titles ahead of their bookstore appearances. It should also be mentioned that BOMC books are several cuts above your average book club book, and are virtually indistinguishable from publisher's editions.

As an additional inducement to join, the plan also includes a special introduction to the King library by King himself, available nowhere else. It comes in its own envelope, and consists of a four-page booklet in which King discusses his career, from the very beginnings up to the forthcoming *Needful Things*.

BOMC is also the only place you can get his special chapbook introduction to the novel *The Collector*.

The club is promoting the series through a set of 60 and 90-second spots, targeting late-night cable television, such as TBS and CNN. If you are unable to find information,

write Book-of-the-Month Club at Camp Hill, PA 17012-0001, or call them toll-free at 1-800-233-1066.

Members might also be willing to share the September 1990 issue of BOMC News, which features a cover story on "The New Stephen King," as well as a short article about *Four Past Midnight*, and a couple of new photos of King with some cute pals.

Beyond the release of *Four Past Midnight*, nothing is certain, although King has completed two novels, *Needful Things* and *Dolores Claiborne*. Although nothing is known about the latter, we do know that *Needful Things* features Sheriff Pangborn from *The Dark Half* and is to be the last novel King will ever write about Castle Rock, Maine. The town, he promises, will go out with a bang.

Released recently on the "Books-About-Stephen King" front is *The Stephen King Quiz Book* by Stephen J. Spignesi. Steve may also be familiar to some of you as the editor of the forthcoming *The Shape Under the Sheet: The Complete Stephen King Encyclopedia*, a valiant attempt to put an amazing amount of reference material about King at everyone's fingertip, due out in early 1991 from Popular Culture Ink, with a limited edition from The Overlook Connection.

But getting back to the *Quiz Book* for a minute -- this is a nifty and inexpensive paperback from NAL which is available everywhere and is absolutely guaranteed to keep King fans busy testing their knowledge for hours, days, weeks, months . . . you get the picture.

Some of you may be wondering if the questions are tough. Well, there are 107 quizzes in the book, over 1500 questions, covering the novels, short stories, movies, biographical details, and many other things. And yes, some of them are very tough. I take a back seat to nobody on my knowledge of the subject, and there's stuff in here I can't answer! I mean, I don't know about you, but

when I read a question (which is in the book) like "What bank held Lars Ancaster's mortgage?" my response is not "The Connecticut Union Bank." My response is "Who the fuck is Lars Ancaster?"

At any rate, this is the most enjoyable book about King I've run across in a long time, at least since the last time I tried doing my Stephen King word-search puzzle (the record for solving it is three hours).

••

This has also been a busy year for Dean R. Koontz. Somehow, in addition to putting in 100-hour weeks on his "Dean Koontz Theater" project for CBS, Koontz managed to find time to write *Cold Fire*, a recent release which is the best thing he's written since *Lightning*. Koontz told me that he hoped the book was "finely layered like a Danish pastry, but with the bite of jalapeno salsa."

The novel is the story of Jim Ironheart, a man with an uncanny knack for being in the right place at the right time. Basically, he travels on impulse to cities around the country and arrives just in time to save people's lives. When he meets a young female reporter named Holly Thorne, she becomes intrigued by him and the two set out on a long voyage of discovery which will eventually reveal the strange secret of his unusual powers.

Along the way, a great number of spiritual Judeo-Christian mythos concepts are explored, giving the novel a spiritual depth unusual in both the genre and Koontz's own oeuvre. Which is not to say that the trademark Koontz suspense is not present -- it is, in spades. In fact, the book's centerpiece is a long sequence with Ironheart aboard an airliner which he knows is doomed to crash, which runs for nearly seventy pages. This is one not to be missed.

In addition, *Dark Harvest* has finished its series of hardcover reissues of the five novels Koontz wrote under the name of Leigh Nichols.

Shadowfires, the last volume, came out late last year. It tells the story of a woman stalked by her dead husband, who has been reanimated as the result of a genetic experiment gone awry -- a favorite Koontz motif! -- and is lavishly illustrated throughout by longtime Koontz cover-artist Phil Parks, who also contributed illustrations for the Putnam limited edition of *Cold Fire*.

On the film front, however, things have not gone so well. The first of the four "Dean Koontz Theater" projects, "Face of Fear," did quite well in the ratings, beating out the season premiere of "Twin Peaks" in its time slot. The show starred Lee Horsley and Pam Dawber, and managed to adapt the novel fairly well, despite a few stupid moments, such as the scene where Dawber's character asks if passersby on the street far below would hear the killer in the building shooting at them with his silenced pistol. Despite the strong showing, Koontz has pulled the plug on the other three projects, stating that the ongoing struggle for quality control was too taxing.

A similar fate befell the upcoming Paramount film based on Koontz's novel *Midnight*. At first, it had seemed that things were going well, but once Stewart Gordon was slated to direct, things fell apart. "We had vastly different visions of this project," Koontz explained. "He saw it as a 'Robot Jox' sort of thing."

"Watchers II," the sequel/re-make of the disastrous first stab at adapting Koontz's best-loved novel, was released virtually straight to video. The film, which stars Marc Singer in the lead, is a better attempt at the book than its teen-marketed predecessor, but is still definitely *not* Koontz's book. The golden retriever in the film turns in a fine performance, however.

But it's still puzzling to me; why do these people feel the need to tamper in such a significant manner with a successful novel in order to turn it into a film, particularly when the result is significantly less suc-

cessful than the book? It's enough to make readers understand Kootz when he says, "I don't know why these people bother to buy books to film, when they change them so much."

Go figure . . .

Kootz had a little better luck onvideowith "Whispers," a film based on his taut suspense novel (one of my favorites) about a woman who is being stalked by a man who seemingly will not die. The film stars Victoria Tennant and Christopher Sarandon, and, like "Watchers II," is available from LIVE Home Video. The film, shot in Canada, follows the novel very closely.

Kootz is also currently working on a screenplay for *Cold Fire*, and is hoping to get the director of "Face of Fear" to helm it. The two are hoping to hammer out a deal which will leave them with some degree of control over the finished product. We'll keep you posted.

Unless you've been asleep out there, you can hardly have escaped knowing that last year marked the centennial of H.P. Lovecraft's birth. A number of genre-related events -- NECONX and the third annual HWA bash, to name just two -- were located in Lovecraft's hometown of Providence, Rhode Island. And Tor Books issued *Lovecraft's Legacy*, an all-new anthology of stories celebrating Lovecraft's place in the genre. The anthology, edited by Robert E. Weinberg and Martin H. Greenburg, features an introduction by Robert Bloch, an early correspondent of Lovecraft's, as well as thirteen stories.

The stories range from Lovecraftian pastiches, such as Mort Castle's "A Secret of the Heart," a nifty tale with a nice and totally unexpected twist at the end, or Gahan Wilson's "H.P.L.," easily the book's best, to tales which have a nebulous connection at best with anything Lovecraftian, such as Gary Brandner's "Ugly" or Joe Citro's "Soul Keeper," which although a nifty little psychological suspense thriller along the lines of *Misery*, isn't very

Lovecraftian.

Other noteworthy stories are: F. Paul Wilson's "The Barrens, a nice reworking of HPL's "The Colour Out of Space," reset in the Jersey Barrens, also the locale of Robert Dunbar's recent novel, *The Pines*; Chet Williamson's "From the Pages of Helmut Hecker," a take on Lovecraft's correspondence-styled stories; and Ray Garton's "The Other Man," a sexy reworking of the Cthulhu Mythos.

Lovecraft's Legacy is a mixed bag of work -- some good, some not so hot -- but that's about normal for an anthology, and the Gahan Wilson story alone is well worth the price of the book.

Now of course, you would expect that Lovecraft's primary publisher, Arkham House, would not let the anniversary slip by without doing something special to promote it, and you'd be right. Not only have they put out a special edition of *Tales of the Cthulhu Mythos* -- containing several stories, including Stephen King's "Jerusalem's Lot" and Karl Edward Wagner's "Sticks," not contained in the original edition -- they are also continuing to keep in print their definitive three-volume set collecting all of Lovecraft's macabre fiction. These books, uniformly bound in the traditional Arkham House black-cloth covers with gold lettering, feature cover paintings by Raymond Bayless. The books are: *The Dunwich Horror and Others*; *At the Mountains of Madness and Other Novels*; and *Dagon and Other Macabre Tales*. All of the books are newly corrected by series editor and Lovecraft scholar S.T. Joshi, working from original autographic and typewritten manuscripts to correct any editorial changes made in the magazine appearances of Lovecraft's stories, producing what is intended to be the definitive edition of the author's work as he wished it presented.

Donald M. Grant also took part in the festivities, issuing a lavishly-appointed edition of *At the Mountains of Madness*, an oversized

book bound in bonded leather and chock-full of chillingly evocative illustrations by Brazilian artist Fernando Duval.

The book is quite large, 13 1/2 by 9 1/2, bound on the short side, which makes it a trifle awkward to put on a bookshelf -- it's about the size of a business ledger -- but fine for library display. Also, as the binding is soft, the cover is flexible to some extent.

According to publisher Grant, the text used is one provided by Scott Meredith, and is the same one which appears in the current Arkham House editions described earlier. The book is available in a limited edition of under 1,000 copies, and is priced at \$120.00, from Donald M. Grant, P.O. Box 187, Hampton Falls, NH 03844.

If that's too pricey, those wishing to read some Lovecraft in honor of the HPL centennial can also order *To Quebec and the Stars*, a collection of nonfiction, also from Grant for \$15.00.

Another anniversary squeaked past recently -- without much ado -- the anniversary of that hot August morning in Fall River, Massachusetts when, according to popular legend, Lizzie Borden took an axe and gave her mother forty whacks. Tor Books commemorates the event with the release of a major novel by Elizabeth Engstrom, appropriately entitled *Lizzie Borden*. An introductory note explains that Engstrom is writing a fictional work based on real events, and taking liberties with some of the persons involved.

The novel's prose is pretty boggy sometimes, and the bulk of the book is merely a lead-in to the final ten pages or so, when the murders take place. Readers are given a number of potential suspects besides Borden -- who was acquitted when she went to trial -- as well as being presented with a truly unique and novel way in which Borden could have committed the murders -- and yet not committed them. You'll have to read the book for yourselves to find out how.

-- CD

IT'S TIME TO REDEFINE "FEAR"

COLD BLOOD

NEW TALES OF MYSTERY AND HORROR

EDITED BY RICHARD T. CHIZMAR

With *Cold Blood*, the World Fantasy Award-nominated editor of *Cemetery Dance* magazine has gathered a landmark anthology of eclectic stories meant to reshape the reader's perception of the Horror Genre. Dark visions abound, to be sure: fear and terror stalk the pages of this book of previously unpublished stories.

But there's a difference.

Cold Blood pulses with a sense of dread and mounting suspense, with mystery and intrigue, with a brooding pace that's refreshingly at odds with the '80s' in-your-face splatter trend.

Featuring 25 excursions into the blackest part of our souls by F. Paul Wilson, Chet Williamson, Ronald Kelly, Joe R. Lansdale, John Shirley, Bentley Little, Brian Hodge, Barry Hoffman, Thomas F. Monteleone, Ardath Mayhar, Rex Miller, Roman A. Ranieri, James Kisner, J. N. Williamson, Paul F. Olson, Nancy A. Collins, William F. Nolan, Rick Hautala, Ed Gorman, Richard Laymon, William Relling Jr., Andrew Vachss, David B. Silva, Tom Elliot, and including an excerpt from the new novel by Ramsey Campbell. Introduction by Douglas E. Winter.

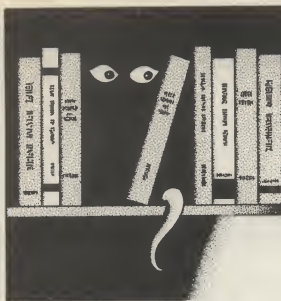
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O R D E R F R O M

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EDWARD
BRYANT

BOOK REVIEWS

It's easy to tag Dan Simmons' new novel *Summer of Night* (Putnam, \$22.95, 560 pp.) as just another Stephen King clone. It's also very wrong. Now it's true that the novel is a thick period-piece (set in 1960) about a bunch of kids locked in mortal combat with a hideous supernatural menace. But no, this is not *IT* redux. Simmons possesses an extraordinary talent and a distinctive voice, and he is no more derivative of King than each worthy is, say, ripping off the Ray Bradbury of *Something Wicked This Way Comes* or *Dandelion Wine*. Simmons was once the same age as his characters in 1960 (twelve), and he lived in the midwest. At various times, both King and Bradbury, and many other writers shared that sort of experience. It's no wonder they all write convincingly about junebugs, summer thunderstorms, fireflies, Fourth of July fireworks, dairy cow-tipping, and all that other sinister, bucolic stuff. And if you still must dig for influences in Simmons' novel, some of the most likely are Harper Lee and Shirley Jackson. Not too shabby.

As the summer of 1960 unfolds in *Summer of Night*, the author displays a convincing memory of every detail. I believed in Elm Haven, a little Illinois town an hour or two out

of Peoria. I believed in Old Central, the huge architectural nightmare of a school constructed in 1876 in anticipation of a population boom that never came. I believed in Dale Stewart, sixth-grader and storyteller, and his friends Kevin, Jim Harlen, Mike, and Dale's little brother, Lawrence. I empathized with Dale's buddy Duane McBride, the incredibly bright kid with the alcoholic father. I smiled at encountering Michelle Staffney, the class cutie. When I was in a small-town sixth grade room, the class cutie was named Michelle too. And I didn't even live in the midwest . . .

The novel starts on the last day of school. Old Central is about to be shut down for good. It's just too old and too expensive for the school district to maintain. Then a student, Tubby Cooke, vanishes somewhere in the basement bowels of Old Central. Complex arabesques of plot begin to revolve as Dale and his friends become implicated in searching for the lost boy, eventually revealing a mysterious occult object called the Borgia Bell, a hushed-up turn of the century lynching, quite a catalogue of nasty supernatural phenomena, an unspeakable horror in the school belfry, and a plot to bring about armageddon.

Summer of Night isn't just an

entertainment. It's a real novel, the pace leisurely and controlled. There are no chainsaw slayings in the first couple hundred pages, just a mounting sense of dread. But then Simmons pulls out the stops and there shouldn't be an unsatisfied horror reader in the house. The author uses the same device he employed successfully in *Carion Comfort*, lunching one of his most sympathetic characters midway through the book as a reminder that the plot is being played just like real life, and that *anyone* can die at any time.

Most of the active characters here are boys, but that doesn't leave the girls in total neglect. When a girl character comes onstage, it's usually in a great role. Aside from such as the beautiful Michelle and Donna Lou Perry, the best softball pitcher in school, the real female focus is on Cordie Cooke, who may well be the most memorable character in the book. Cordie drops in and out of sight, but when she appears in the plot, it's always at a pivotal point. Cordie's from the wrong side of the tracks, it was her brother who disappeared at the beginning, she totes a mean scattergun, and she's afraid of absolutely nothing.

I suspect some readers will want to argue with the author about

his portrayal of childhood and how his kids deal with frightening and dangerous aspects of life. But I think he has a good memory for the age he's depicting, and he paid attention during the sixteen years he taught sixth grade and administered gifted and talented programs. Dale and his friends are a mixture of precocious near-adults and believably frightened children, having to depend on their wits and luck within an adult world that will not believe them.

That is, of course, what makes *Summer of Night* a first-rate novel -- its kids having to mature and deal with a nightmare universe beyond their comprehension. Teachers and parents, or zombies and psychotic dupes of the supernatural, maybe they're all the same when you're surviving as a youngster. When Simmons' survivors gain a measure of control and stability in their shattered world, the novel ends on a delicate note that will remind you exactly why you read for pleasure. And if you don't swallow once or twice more than you need to, then you're hard of heart indeed. I suspect *Summer of Night* may be bound for the bigtime, best-seller status, major movie treatment, all that. But if so, it goes with its self-respect intact. Dan Simmons has turned out another winner.

••

One wonders sometimes if there's anything Clive Barker can do with a more than fair degree of facility. He's got pretty fair reputations as a novelist, actor, playwright, short story writer, theatrical director, filmmaker, and artist. But can he bake a cherry pie? More likely a steak and kidney pie, and we might well suspect where the kidneys came from.

Clive Barker, *Illustrator* (Eclipse Books, \$19.95, unpaginated) is a nicely put together, coffee-table proportioned collection of Barker art, ranging from the lavishly detailed paintings used on the British hard-

back reprints of the *Books of Blood* to what are effectively film storyboard notes and plain old doodlings of perverse inner musings.

Edited by Steve Niles and introduced by *Taboo's* Stephen R. Bissette, the book's wide-ranging spectrum of Barker art is linked by Fred Burke's text, including quite a bit of interviewed Barker commentary on his own aesthetic. "I'm trying my damndest within the confines of the democratic -- and you would think the democratic art form would give you space, but in fact it doesn't; it gives you less space rather than more -- to address and create quite complex and elaborate and really quite elitist ideas." And "I've always seen the fantastique in every form as being a means to blow the rules -- in fantasy all bets are off. What is real, what is good, what is a decent way to live your life, a safe way to live your life -- all that stuff is off . . ."



The range of styles is immense in this collection. But whether the medium is elaborate painting or just minimalist pen and ink sketches, the emphasis is on faces. Whether the monstrous or the merely sinister, the focus in most of the included work fixes on portraiture. And in those portraits, along with the environments that frequently surround them, the reader can have an analytical field day.

Clive Barker, *Illustrator* obvi-

ously will have a ready audience in the legions of the writer's fans. But there is a value to the book on beyond that kind of supplementary fleshing-in. For anyone interested in the process of bridging that surreal gap between the inner imagination and the outer manifestations of mundane life, this books pertains. It stands independently as the portrait of a comfortably strange and bountifully talented man.

••

Taboo (SpiderBaby Grafix, \$14.95, 168 pp.) is the irregularly published graphic anthology of thoughtful weirdness. As ever, the fourth volume is a stimulating mixture of full narratives, bits and pieces, and spot art. Some of the contents will offend the more sensitive reader. All should stimulate healthy discussion, debate, knock-down drag-out arguments, whatever. *Taboo* prides itself on pulling no punches and demonstrating why it is that we warily prize the First Amendment. At the same time, the anthology conducts itself with an almost ponderous decorum and dignity. Publishers Bissette and Nancy J. O'Connor, it would seem, prefer not to become easy targets for charges of pandering and crass exploitation. The result is that some mighty strange projects get presented with a perfectly straight face.

The book leads from strength with a series of short pieces much like quick, sharp, body-blows. Neil Gaiman and Michael Zulli's "Babycakes" is a fable postulating the changes wrought should all the animals in the world suddenly vanish. What would butchers do? Leather makers, medical researchers, product testers? Yep, you got it. Swift knew. And when all the babies are used up? Humans will always find an answer . . . Matt Brooker, Andrew Robinson, and Molly Eyre's "Cholesterol" is another fable, this one a bitter exercise in paranoia about an old man being destroyed by the C.I.A.

Well . . . maybe it's not paranoia. "Davey's Dream" by Mark Askwith and Richard Taylor evokes "Little Nemo in Slumberland" and transforms those dreamy images into a disquieting adult nightmare.

The centerpiece of the anthology, printed on goldenrod paper, is "Eyes of the Cat," a collaboration between Moebius and Alejandro Jodorowsky. This mannered cinematic account of a strange blind boy and his hunting bird was originally a giveaway promotion book in Europe. It is published here in English translation for the first time. As a bonus, appended to "Eyes of the Cat" are some pages of underground cartoonist Spain Rodriguez' own version of Jodorowsky's film, *El Topo*.

Also from the underground, S. Clay Wilson contributes "Retinal Worm," a Cronenbergian romp through childhood myth and madness. Tim Lucas and Stephen Blue's "Blue Angel" steps into Thomas Harris country insofar as it treats a cheerfully buccollic serial murderer. Charles Vess and Elaine Lee's "Morrigan Tales" is a long, lush fairytale, suffused with edgy horror. "Neither Seen Nor Heard" by Mike Hoffman is another serial murderer portrait, combined with a man learning the joys of unexpected fatherhood. Cyanide pacifiers, indeed.

Alan Moore and Eddie Campbell wrap up this volume with the third portion of "From Hell." Set in Victorian, England, this long tale is seemingly a sort of Watergate approach to speculating about the Ripper legend. Conspiracy is the order of the day.

There's more. But this gives some idea of the range and tone of *Taboo's* contents. It's the visual storytelling equivalent of a good dark fantasy prose anthology. Think of the horror numbers of *Pulphouse*, but with many pictures and a minimum of words. I suspect both publications share an identical ambition to hook their readers through off-kilter shocks, bizarre imagination, and occasional grace notes of sly

humor.

**

In a market of high-concept anthologies, Gary Raisor's *Obsessions* (Dark Harvest, \$20.95, 285 pp.) is a natural. The title says it all. I suspect there are few writers who, hearing that title, can't immediately come up with six or eight absolutely appropriate ideas. The problem would be winnowing down all those obsessive possibilities to a favored choice. Another problem would be the subjective nature of so many obsessions. This anthology runs the risk of a few readers leafing through and saying, "Huh, so what's so weird about being obsessed with

? I go and do that all the time." If Raisor is lucky, he won't be deluged now with that sort of fan letter.

Obsessions sprawls satisfactorily with 30 contributions from as many writers, including yours truly. There are big-name contributors including Dean R. Koontz, F. Paul Wilson, Rick Hautala, Chet Williamson, Darrell Schweitzer, and Charles L. Grant. There are such hot newer writers as Nicholas Royle, Bill Crider, Scott A. Cupp, Kevin J. Anderson, Stanley Wiater, and Glen Vasey.

There are major sub-groups of obsessions. Then there are notable singles. Thomas F. Monteleone in "The Pleasure of Her Company" plumbs one man's love for a certain platinum-haired sex goddess. In John Shirley's "Woodgrains," the wonderfully competitive world of art gets a once-over that Clive Barker might well appreciate. Shirley presents us with the portrait of a sculptor so covetous of his competition, he subsumes their influences -- again and again and again. Richard Christian Matheson, in "Region of the Flesh," presents us with a person who purchases a garage-sale bed upon which a husband was slaughtered by a wife. The buyer then falls into an all-too-empathetic relationship with both parties.

Relationships certainly are central to most of the best stories in the book. Edward Gorman's "Killing Kate" unveils a surprise or two in showing the therapeutic side of murder. In C.J. Henderson's "Whose Turn Is It?" a jaded couple keep their mutual interest alive through means probably little recommended by marriage counselors. Dean Wesley Smith puts an odd -- and oddly sentimental -- spin on obsessive love in "She Would Have Been My Wife Had I Not Died." But for a *really* interesting take on relationships, try Nina Kiriki Hoffman's "Heart of Gold." It's a sharp and surreal guide to capturing your lover's heart.

Parenting can be innately obsessive. Nancy Holder takes the desire for bearing children to unnerving extremes in "Lady Madonna." In "Sanctuary of the Shrinking Soul," Elizabeth Massie shows a disturbed mother in full, anguished retreat from the death of her child. On the other side of the coin, David B. Silva, in "Alone of His Kind," affectingly depicts a father in equally frenzied pursuit of his dead offspring. But the short, sharp, shock award goes to Kristine Kathryn Rusch for "Self-Protection," a cameo portrait of a young woman that cuts like a straight-razor.

Children also figure strongly in Joe R. Lansdale's "In the Cold, Dark Time," an atypically science-fictional scenario of a bleak future in which children require extra societal attention. Finally, "The Counselor" by Dan Simmons is probably the most muscular story in the book. This novelette is about the derided and despised staff member of the title, who has become so thoroughly immersed in his students' problems, he will do anything to make them better. The counselor is a troubled vet so focused on caring, he has stopped any questioning of whether the ends justify the means. The story is strong, affecting, and ultimately surprising.

Obsessions has its share of dross, but the winners far outnum-

ber the less fortunate. And the book would be worth its price for the Simmons story alone.

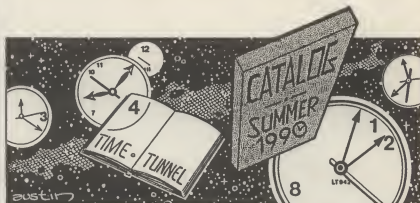
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SHORT TAKES

The latest Roadkill Press chapbook is *Fairytales* (c/o Little Bookshop of Horrors, 10380 Ralston Rd., Arvada, CO 80004, \$3 plus \$1 postage, 28 pp.), an extraordinary piece of storytelling about storytelling from Steve Rasnic Tem. Tem writes about Jack Johanssen, a writer of sanitized contemporary children's stories. But within this story are interspersed a dozen of Johanssen's private nightmares, 12 fictions he thinks of as *Tales I Can Never Read to My Children*. *Fairytales* therefore qualifies, I suppose, as meta-fantasy. Tem feels his ending to the story is rather upbeat, even constructive. I'm not so sure about that; but then who am I to contradict the author? High praise is in order as well for the artist. Timothy Standish's cover is fine; his two monochrome interiors are fabulous.

F. Paul Wilson's *Pelts* (Footsteps Press, Box 75, Round Top, NY 12473, \$15 plus \$2 postage, 30 pp.) is a piece of fiction with a clear political agenda. The author's royalties from this book will be going to Friends of Animals. The story itself is a didactic fable about the terrible things that befall men and women who exploit or profit from the furry beasts of the field. Wilson's Jersey Pine Barrens raccoon poachers, a furrier, and a woman who lusts for the eventual coon coat, all end horribly. Politics or no, *Pelts* is a strong story. Jill Bauman contributes a nicely understated macabre cover. Bill Munster and Footsteps Press have performed their usual fine production job.

-- CD



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BITING THE BIG ONE

GARY BRANDNER

GARY BRANDNER is best-known as the creator of *The Howling* series and the author of over two dozen novels, including the recent, *Doomstalker*. The following tale is Brandner's second appearance in *Cemetery Dance*.

To be or not to be?

It was no longer a question for Miles Berryman. His mind was made up. He was going out. He was saying adios, world. He was biting the big one. The only question now was should he treat himself to one good bowel movement first.

Nah. The way things were going, he probably couldn't get it out. He sat on the toilet with his chin in his hands and studied the amber plastic vials lined up on the edge of the sink. The labels were typed by those faulty machines all pharmacists seem to use. Codeine, Darvon, Percodan, Synalgos, Pentazocine, Dalmane. The unused surplus from two decades of various aches, pains, and forgotten ailments. Why had he saved them in direct defiance of the stern label warnings? Why had he kept the little bottles long past the discard date? Had some deadly little imp in the shadows of his mind been preparing him all along for this one final act?

Miles rose from the toilet seat, pulled up his pants and buckled the belt. One by one he shook the bottles, listening to the plastic chatter of the pills inside. He had long ago disabled the infernal child-proof caps so a reasonable adult could now remove them without flying into a fury.

A few days ago the pill bottles had reposed deep in a cobwebby corner of Miles Berryman's bathroom cupboard. Out of sight, if not entirely out of mind. A few days ago there had been no reason for this last contemplative sit on the john. No thought then in his conscious mind that he might now be preparing for his final exit. Then, with shocking suddenness, his life, his hopes, and his future sank like a cannonball in quicksand.

It began with the 7 A.M. call to Gil Silversmith in New York. He chose that unpleasant hour because he could still get night rates for the phone call, and with his bank account barely afloat, the few dollars saved could be crucial. In New York it would be ten o'clock in the morning. About the time agents like Gil dropped into their offices, and before they went to work lunching with editors.

Gil had picked up the phone on the first ring.

"Miles, hey, I was just reaching for the phone to call

you. How's the weather out there?"

Oh, sure, they were always just about to call you. "It's fine." Even at night rates Miles had no time to deliver a transcontinental weather report. "Gil, what's happening with *Terror Squad*? Wickes has the manuscript over a month now?" There was a brief, deadly pause at the other end of the line. "Ah, Miles, I guess you haven't seen *Publisher's Weekly*."

"My subscription lapsed. Why?"

"Fountain Books was acquired by Taniguchi International. Wickes is out of a job, and you're out of a publisher."

Bad news, but he could still roll with the punches. "So how about taking it to somebody else? Bantam? Dell? Zebra, even?"

"Miles, listen to me. You know I love you and admire your work, but the truth is nobody wants the kind of stuff you write. Macho adventure is twenty years behind the times. Dave Wickes was buying you out of old friendship. That's one reason the new people dumped him. You're out of date, Miles."

"I'm out of date?" Miles yelled into the phone. "I'm out of date? Maybe your marketing methods could use a little modernizing!"

A long sigh from New York. "I do what I can, Miles. Actually, you might be happier with somebody else representing you."

"I might, at that!"

Bang. A slammed-down receiver had cut off a working relationship of twenty-two years.

••

Miles shook the white pills from the first bottle into the palm of his left hand. Five of these babies left. He filled the plastic bathroom cup from the faucet and swallowed the pills in two gulps. The next bottle had a dozen fat black and orange capsules. Halloween colors. He swallowed them two at a time, gagging slightly when he got to the last pair. The other bottles held two, five, nine, and six pills respectively. How long would it take, he wondered, before he began to feel something?

••

After he had slammed down the telephone Miles experienced a pang of regret at dumping Gil Silversmith. The agent had, after all, got him the series at Fountain

Books, even if the advances were pitiful. But the hell with that. Book writing was for chumps anyway. Movies and TV, that's where the money was. And this very morning, he reminded himself, he had an appointment to pitch a series idea to Brian Caan, just about the hottest producer in town with hit shows on two networks and offices in Century City. Hell, he didn't need Gil SilverSmith or David Wickes or any of those small-timers. He was going to move in much faster company. And about time.

••

Brian Caan's outer office looked like the bridge of the *Starship Enterprise*. Berryman sat uncomfortably in a molded plastic chair and stared at the blowups of stars from the young producer's string of hit series. He tried to act as though he'd been in similar offices many times. In truth, this was his first. And he would not have gotten this far had it not been for Kathy Oliver. Kathy was a bit-actress, a day player in Hollywood lingo. She and Miles had been seeing each other for two years. She would never be a star, but she worked regularly, and knew enough people to get Miles in to see Brian Caan.

The phone on the reception desk warbled. The Morgan Fairchild lookalike at the desk spoke inaudibly into the mouthpiece. She stabbed a button with a glossy forefinger and gave Berryman a blinding smile.

"Brian's ready for you, Miles."

He loved the first-name intimacy, but Miles sounded like something out of a Victorian novel. He resolved to start calling himself something more '90s. Justin, maybe. Or Shawn. He nodded to the girl, clutched his vinyl zipper case, and walked in.

He knew immediately he had made a mistake in his dress. He had carefully chosen his good herringbone sportcoat, a blue button-down shirt, and a pearly gray knit tie. Brian Caan lounged behind his desk in carefully ragged designer jeans and a Save The Dolphins T-shirt. On his feet, which rested on the glass desktop, were a pair of custom Reeboks that cost more than Berryman's whole outfit.

"Whatcha got, Miles?" the producer asked without preliminaries.

"Well," he cleared his throat and started again. "Well, I had an idea for a series about these two ex-cops. They're framed, see, and kicked off the force. Only they're not *really* kicked off. It's all a setup so they can get in tight with the bad guys."

Caan was studying him closely. Berryman took it as a sign he was scoring some points.

"One of the cops is a Rugged by-the-book type, you see, and the other is--"

"Let me guess. The other is a hip young free spirit who's always battling authority."

"Well . . . yeah."

"Miles, how old are you?"

The question hit him in the gut. It took him a couple of beats to shift gears. "Forty-four," he said, shaving three years.

"Uh-huh. You know the audience we're trying to reach, don't you? Eighteen to thirty-four-year-old males. They're the ones with bucks to spend on Japanese cars and light beer."

"Well, uh, I think I can talk their language."

"Not with warmed-over *Starsky and Hutch*. What else you got?"

"Uh, that's it." That was it, all right. That was the nifty series idea he'd been nursing along for a couple of years, just waiting for the day when he could reveal it to some hot producer.

"So hit me when you got something else. Nice talking to you, Mel."

Berryman staggered from the Star Trekish office, rode down to the subterranean parking lot, paid a seven-dollar fee for 30 minutes of parking, and drove out onto Pico Boulevard in a daze.

Forty-seven years old, and he might as well have been eighty-seven. No agent, no publisher, no bright new career in TV. About all he had left was Kathy. He snapped out of his trance and steered the Pinto toward her apartment in West Hollywood.

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Miles choked down the last of the pills, the pink submarine-shaped Darvocets. He stared at his mirror image. No change was yet apparent. What would be the first symptom, he wondered? A sleepy feeling? Right now all he felt was bloated from the water he drank to wash the pills down.

He hoped this was not going to take too long. He had always made it a point not to hang around saying goodbye when the party was over. Get your hat and get out was Miles Berryman's motto.

Maybe a little shooter would speed things along. All of the pills warned about mixing them with alcohol. Caused unpleasant side effects. Like death. He headed for the kitchen, got down the bottle of Jim Beam, and poured himself a healthy four fingers.

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"So you blew it," Cathy said.

"How was I supposed to communicate with a 15-year-old producer? I don't think the guy shaved yet. He looked me right in the eye and told me I was too old."

"You went in to see Brian Caan with only one idea?"

"It was a *good* idea."

"If it was good enough he would have bought it. Miles, I'm tired of your whining and your excuses. I got you in to see one of the hottest producers in town and you

messed up. I don't know what future there is for us."

"Maybe none, is that what you're saying?"

Cathy shrugged, and in that terrible moment Miles realized that's what she was saying.

..

The bourbon went down hard. Miles resisted the impulse to gag. What a waste it would be to barf up all those carefully hoarded pills now when he had finally made the decision to check out. A tiny pulse began to beat somewhere behind his right eye. His vision blurred for a moment, then cleared.

Here it comes. He walked across the room to the sofa-bed, stretched out, closed his eyes, and tried to think tranquil thoughts.

..

It was not as though he hadn't made one last try. When he got home from Cathy's he sat down at the old Royal, rolled in a sheet of fresh white bond. He was, Berryman thought, probably the last writer in the country

working on a manual typewriter. He poised his fingers over the keys and waited for the words to come.

And waited.

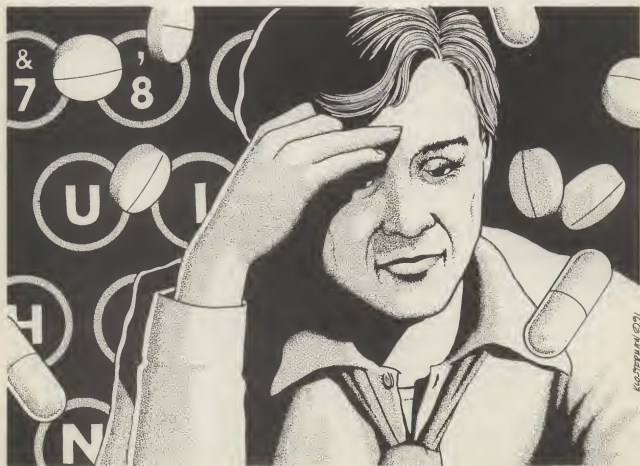
And waited.

And when, finally, he knew the words were not coming, not ever again, he got up and walked into the bathroom to look for the pills.

..

Berryman was sick. The little throb in his eyeball had grown into a shattering ache that threatened to explode his brain. His stomach alternately cramped and heaved like a living thing. His muscles twitched, his bowels loosened. This was not the gentle drifting off he had imagined. A gun would have been faster. Shove the barrel in your mouth, pull the trigger, *boom*, brains on the ceiling and it's over. But Berryman did not have a gun. Nobody he knew had a gun. Anyway, it was messy. Pills would be much neater. Or so he had thought. Right now he would have been happy for a heavy caliber bullet through his pulsating brain.

He rolled his head to one side and retched. A glob



of thick vomit filled his mouth and dribbled from his lips onto the pillow. It was a brownish-yellow and smelled like last month's garbage.

Berryman struggled to a sitting position. The sofa-bed swapped ends. He fell back, sweating and groaning. Through the pain and the sickness one terrible thought pushed into his darkening brain.

I do not want to die!

With his head trying to explode, his joints on fire, his stomach heaving, he pushed himself up out of bed and stood more or less upright.

Got to make it to the phone . . . dial 911.

A roaring rushing wind filled his ears. Foul-smelling waste ran down his legs. The room exploded in brilliant light. The gritty carpet hit his face.

The long night closed in.

••

Then pale, watery white light. Uneven humming sounds. Soft coolness across his face. A faint headache residue. Stomach sore and empty, but blessedly still. He moved a hand. It worked. He raised the hand to his face and opened his eyes. Something soft and white. Cloth. He clutched the sheet in his fist and pulled it away from his eyes.

A young latino in white smock stared at him with huge brown eyes. "*Santa Maria, Madre Dios!* He's alive!"

••

There was a babble of voices as people in hospital costumes gathered around him. He perceived that he was lying on a gurney, and from the smell of formaldehyde, and the still, sheeted figures lying on both sides of him he understood he was in the dead room. But he was alive! No thought had ever been as orgasmically pleasing. *Alive.*

The stunned attendants wheeled him out of the pathology lab and into an elevator. As he rode back up from the basement to the world of the living, Miles Berryman lay back and smiled, savoring his return.

The crowd around the gurney grew as he was wheeled off the elevator and down the hall to a private room. Doctors, nurses, orderlies, technicians, and civilians crowded around as Berryman was gently transferred to the bed.

A gray-haired man in a lab jacket leaned over him. "How are you feeling, Mr. Berryman?"

"Fine. A little shaky." He managed a weak grin. "I guess my next line is 'Where am I?'"

"You're in Queen of Angels Hospital. I'm Dr. Foster. You were brought here at one o'clock this afternoon in a comatose state resulting from massive overdose of prescription drugs, complicated by ingestion of

alcohol. Every effort was made to revive you -- CPR, stomach pump, electroshock. All results were negative. Vital signs ceased and you were pronounced dead in the O.R. at . . ." he consulted notes on a clipboard, ". . . two thirty-five this afternoon."

"Dead?" The word had a cold, foreign sound.

Dr. Foster continued, "It is now 7:15. No one in medical history, Mr. Berryman, has revived this long after clinical death."

A carefully coifed blonde woman with a bright orange microphone pushed her way next to the bed. For the first time Berryman saw a video camera pointed at him by a bearded young man in jeans who stood on a chair at one side of the room.

The blonde woman turned toward the camera and spoke into her microphone. "I'm Shelly Barnes here at the bedside of the man they're calling Miracle Miles Berryman." She turned back toward the bed and spoke in careful tones, "Mr. Berryman, what can you tell us about your experience?" She deftly flipped the microphone head to his lips.

"Experience?" He needed time to clear the cobwebs.

"You know . . . how it was on the . . ." The young woman groped a moment for words. "The other side." She covered the microphone briefly and said in a more normal voice, "Give us something good, Miles. This is for the 11-o'clock news. Channel Eight."

Berryman stared at her as comprehension dawned. He looked past her at the somber faced doctor, then up at the red eye of the camera. The others in the room pressed forward eagerly, expectantly.

Miracle Miles Berryman?

Other side?

These idiots thought he had come back from the dead. They were waiting for him to give them a message from the Great Beyond. Sure, he could tell them about it. How it was all pain and puking and the darkness. He opened his mouth but the words did not come. An idea was beginning to form.

"Was there a tunnel?" asked a young woman in a nurse's smock. "With someone waiting for you at the end?"

"Did you see other people?" suggested an intern. "People you recognized?"

Berryman looked into their eyes, read the hope and pleading there. Sherry Barnes, microphone poised, nodded encouragement. She wanted a story. They all wanted a story. Okay, he was a story teller, wasn't he? He'd give them one. But forget the headache and vomit. And forget the old tunnel-with-a-light-at-the-end bullshit. Twenty-five years as a fiction writer, he ought to be able to come up with something original.

"There was no tunnel," he said, his voice weak and halting. The disappointment among the watchers was almost palpable. "There was a meadow." Renewed hope

as they crowded closer. "The grass was cool, green, and velvet soft." Not a sound could be heard in the hospital room. Shelly Barnes' sculptured mouth opened over her capped teeth. "There was a stream of crystal clear bubbling water."

Was he traveling it on a little heavy? Not from the look of the people surrounding his bed. There was a yearning hunger in their eyes, and he, Miles Berryman could feed it.

"The sky," he said, his voice growing stronger, "was the deepest, most endless blue you can imagine." His audience stirred, and Miles the storyteller knew it was time to cut the narrative description. "Then . . . " meaningful pause, " . . . I heard a voice."

A middle-aged nurse could not contain herself. "What did the voice say?"

As Berryman formulated a line of Godlike dialogue there was a shifting of bodies in the room. Those closest to the bed turned in annoyance. Shelly Barnes protected her microphone as a dark-eyed man with white-blond hair and a glittering dawn-grey suit eased his way to bedside.

"Mr. Berryman's been through an extremely stressful experience," he said. "He needs rest now."

There was a murmur of protest from the onlookers, but Dr. Foster stepped forward with some reluctance and said, "We do need to make a thorough examination of the patient, so I must ask you all to leave now. If Mr. Berryman's condition permits, he can see visitors tomorrow."

With a murmur of disappointment the people slowly cleared the room. All except the doctor and a single nurse, who conferred quietly in the corner, and the late arriving stranger, who remained at Mile's bedside.

"What's the idea?" said Berryman. "I was going great."

The stranger produced a heavily embossed card from his breast pocket and snapped it in front of Berryman's face. "I don't think you realize what you've got here, Miles."

Berryman squinted at the card.

*Ellison Quick
Senior Representative
International Talent Consultants*

"ITC? You're with ITC?" The absolute pinnacle of agencies. Only the top stars, the major writers, the name-brand directors were handled by ITC.

"I was visiting a client on this floor," said Quick, "when I heard about you. Miles, you're sitting on a gold mine if you handle it right. ITC would like to represent you."

There was only one answer to that, and Berryman delivered it.

"Now the first thing I want you to do," said Quick,

"is clam up. Say nothing to anybody about your . . . your little adventure."

"Yeah, but--"

"Miles, if you're going to be handled by ITC, there are no buts. Your story of what happened during the three hours you were officially dead is going to make you a lot, I mean a *lot* of money. What we don't do now is give the product away. You keep your mouth shut and let me handle the media."

"Okay, Mr. Quick."

"Call me El."

Miles spent the next three days in the hospital undergoing every conceivable medical test. The results were released in detail to an eager media, but true to his agreement, Miles declined all interviews, and spoke to no one of his after-death experience, either real or imaginary.

The news stories during his remaining stay in the hospital were skillfully orchestrated by Ellison Quick. "Miracle Miles" became famous overnight. On his last bedside visit the agent spread out in front of Miles the offers already pouring in from publishers, producers, talk shows, shoe manufacturers.

Berryman could barely contain his glee. "Random House? Universal? Geraldo? Wow! Which do we accept, El?"

"None of them."

"Huh?"

"These are peanuts. By the time the hype gets rolling you're going to see contracts with seven figures on the bottom line."

On his release from the hospital Berryman expected to move into the Beverly Hills Hotel or some equivalent lodging, considering the unlimited sums of money he was about to make. But Ellison Quick spirited him off to a drab room in a neglected part of the city.

"How come?" Berryman wanted to know. "This place is even crummier than my old apartment. I can afford better now, can't I?"

"Miles, do you trust me?"

"Yeah. I guess so."

"Then *trust* me. ITC will build you up until the whole world is screaming for you. When the demand is at its absolute peak, that's when we whip off the wraps and give you to them. Until then we want you out of sight. Build the mystery angle. Believe me, this is the way to handle it."

Berryman looked unhappily around his glum surroundings. "So what am I supposed to do in the meantime? This dump doesn't even have a television set."

"Write the book, baby. Everything we have planned for you depends on the book you come up with." He pointed at a wooden table and chair in one corner of the room. "See? We even brought in your old typewriter. You write the story of your experience, Miles, and we'll sell it. We'll sell it for a price you won't believe. You'll

never have to worry about another thing. Just tell your story."

"Listen, El, about that story . . ."

The agent held up a manicured hand. "Stop right there. Don't tell me anything. What was it Hemingway said? Talk about it and it goes away. You're a writer, write it."

With nothing else to do in the drab little room, Miles could devote full time to the book. In six weeks it was finished. He put in every wild idea he could come up with about what the afterlife might be. The experience in the hospital when he revived gave him a pretty good idea what people wanted to hear, and he embellished it with every childhood image of heaven he could dredge up.

Ellison Quick dropped in daily with reports of his progress. He refused to look at the completed pages, saying he wanted to get the story along with the rest of the world. Random House and Putnam were locked in an all-out bidding war for the book. Stephen Spielberg wanted screen rights, and was willing to let Miles script it and even direct if he wanted to. Johnny Carson's people promised him the feature spot, and not on a night when Jay Leno was hosting. There was a globe-girdling lecture tour, invitations from heads of state, open-ended endorsement contracts for all manner of products.

And women.

ITC's careful handling had molded Miles Berryman into a combination guru and sex god. Ellison Quick fanned out before him a handful of 8-by-10 glossies of drop-dead gorgeous women who were clamoring to do anything . . . anything just to spend a little time with Miracle Miles.

On the day he finished the book, Ellison Quick packed the 400 manuscript pages into a box and tucked it under his arm. "I'm not taking any chances with this baby. I'll hand carry it to New York myself and let the princes of publishers row fight over it. You sit tight, baby.

When I get back all your work is going to start paying off."

"It's about time," Berryman observed.

The agent tossed him a salute and went out the door.

For three days Miles paced the floor of his drab little room in an agony of suspense. He yearned to just stroll out on the street, walk up to the first person he met and say, "Hi, I'm Miracle Miles Berryman." But he didn't. When he was this close to achieving everything he had ever dreamed of, he was not about to screw it up even a little.

So he paced and he fretted and he waited.

It was nine in the morning when Ellison Quick returned. He was carrying the manuscript box. Berryman leaped up from the couch and ran to meet him.

"Well? Well? WELL?"

The agent tossed the box of pages across the room. It hit the floor and burst open.

"It's a piece of shit."

"Wh-what?!"

"Random House says it's a piece of shit. Putnam says it's a piece of shit. I finally read it myself, Miles, and you know what? It's a piece of shit."

"What are you saying?"

"I'm saying it's over, baby. We went for the brass ring and we missed. That's life. If I were you I'd stay out of sight for a while. You don't want to know what they're saying about you out there. So long, Miles. It's been interesting."

Berryman stood as though bolted to the floor. "I can't believe this. I flat out can't believe this. After all I've gone through, I've got nothing. Not even what little I had before. Hell, I might as well really be dead."

At the door Ellison Quick turned back and winked.

"Miles, what makes you think you're not?"

-- CD



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FEATURING THE FOLLOWING

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MATTHEW J.
COSTELLO

NIGHTMARE ALLEY

A bit of a warning here.

A public service announcement, if you will.

Some of what follows you may not want to read. No, not if you're one of those people who likes to take your honesty in small doses. You know what I mean . . . Someone -- a friend, maybe an acquaintance -- sidles up to you . . . and asks if they can unload some heavy material on you.

They have a drug problem, say. Or they discovered their wife whooping it up with Merry Mailman. One of their kids jumped out a window. Their career's in the toilet.

And if your reaction is to back away, thinking that what they're about to dump on you may be catching, then what follows, in this here installment of the old *Nightmare Alley*, may not be for you.

That said, let me proceed.

Recently, in the course of writing a book, I developed dark feelings that disabled me -- at least as far as my family and friends went.

Here's what happened. After writing a series of horror novels where the boogie men were organic hive creatures from either (a) Antarctica or (b) the hydrothermal vents at the bottom of the sea, I turned to a realistic horror.

I wrote a book about a hostage who comes home from Beirut after being held for five years. He escapes, after horrors that made my creatures look pretty damned benign. But that was only the start. The ex-hostage comes home to his wife -- who has found someone else -- and a daughter who doesn't know him at all.

And then the real story, a murder story if you will, begins.

Now this book, *Home*, won't be out for at least a year -- probably more.

But after writing a bunch of horror books and thinking: hey, this is easy. This is fun . . . *Home* brought me up short. I was awake at night. I was preoccupied by my characters. Christmas and New Year's were write-offs for me because I was somewhere else.

And I didn't like where I was.

It was grim, friends, and it stayed that way until something happened, just past the halfway point of the book. It was at that point that -- despite the real horrors, despite the danger that was building in the story -- there was hope.

It came from the little girl, from the hostage's daughter. Some hope for the characters, for the story, for me.

Now, this may all sound like bullshit. But my friends who suffered with me through all this know how crazy I became. I went down into the pit for this story, and I came out.

Or copped out.

I have a lurking suspicion that I perhaps escaped the horror just as soon as I saw a way out. After all, I'm only human. The writing was good, the story was damned strong, but I could only ride that nasty pony for so long.

And that's the true story. How I lost my mind a little bit -- for the first time -- and then got it back. A cautionary tale about how writing can be more than slamming the keys and waiting for the reviews.

But I promised, in my last column, to tell you why anyone can do this.

If you want to go in the pit.

You see, most people act as though their personality is the way they really are, that their personality, their life is *who* they are.

While any psych major can tell you that the personality, the way people laugh, their sense of humor, their value system, all the bits and pieces, are a construct -- put together from the day we're born.

And just as it's put together, it can -- sports fans -- come right apart.

Just as our life can be plunged into realms we never hoped to see.

A plane crash gives you nine seconds in hell.

Or you come home and find someone robbing the old VCR. So now they have to kill you.

A doctors check-up -- strictly routine -- brings some very bad news that your final roundup looms ahead.

But we live and act as if the world is sane, that who we are is rooted in a blessed solidity.

Writers know better.

They see their own potential for craziness, for losing it, for having their life blown away by events.

Anything is possible.

Ask Patty Hearst.

Anything.

Accept that, accept that who you *think* you are is just a bunch of blocks fitted together, and you're halfway there to being a pro.

Because writing that speaks to that potential -- of change, of growth, or surprise -- speaks to the reader inside that knows that our humdrum, secure life, our hearty hello to the neighbor we know so well, is a damned fragile creation.

And how would this play out in action? I mean, how would you use real life in your writing?

How about this. Taken from a book of mine, due out next February, with the working title of *Manhattan Beach* . . .

We had an ant problem in my house.

First, there was the random ant, these, big, black ants, just here and there. My wife would see one in the bathroom, call me in for the kill -- in some ways she's an old-fashioned girl.

But then we'd see one in the kitchen.

And these ants, as I mentioned, were big suckers. They made an audible popping sound when I squashed their bodies in a hastily grabbed napkin.

Then the problem grew worse. Big black ants in the kitchen, in the cupboard. We sprayed, but they kept on coming. They were on my stereo equipment, behind the stereo cabinet.

I'd lie on the floor and feel something move on my hand.

Sometimes I'd spot one on a ledge. I'd see the big fucker's antennae quiver, trying to decide which way to run away.

My wife woke up screaming one night. Something walked across her forehead.

We had to do *something*.

It was my idea to try and find where they were coming from.

To track them down, sort of. An entomological Frank Buck.

And all paths led to the bathroom.

One night, I threw on a light and there were dozens of ants crawling over the sink, the spigots, the mirror. They were having one hell of a good time. And they didn't seem to give a shit that I was there.

I started dabbing at them with paper towels, getting two, three at a time, throwing one towel away, with black legs a quivering, before going for the rest.

The ones that were left started retreating to the cabinet below the sink, a black hole of Calcutta filled with sponges, Vanish, paper products, and assorted magic elixirs.

No one had been in said cabinet for a while.

And now we enter the wonderful part of the story.

The ants were in there. They came from there. I would clean it out, maybe seal any holes. Bomb the cabinet with spray.

I bent down and started cleaning it out.

Most of the cans were lined with a fine dusting of rust. The sponges were dry and shriveled, sponge fossils.

I caught a few more unlucky ants, darting for cover. I was going to get the bastards.

And when the cabinet was finally empty, I got a flashlight and looked inside the cabinet.

I didn't see anymore ants. And no hole for them to come in, or escape by.

And -- at this point -- I'm still Matt Costello, husband, father, writer, and assorted other roles. I wasn't yet a madman, a crazy person . . .

I didn't see a thing. So I leaned into the small cabinet, just large enough to hold my head, getting in my head, wedging in one hand, holding a tiny Rainbow Brite flashlight.

Couldn't see a damn thing. Not straight ahead, nothing at all.

The ants must be getting in another way, I thought. Yup, I'll have to look someplace else.

And then -- one of those special moments -- I looked up. To the underbelly of the sink, the splintery underside of the counter that surrounded it.

It was *black* with ants. Attracted by the water, maybe by the sealant used by the builder of the house. Maybe they had a nest there -- I don't know.

I screamed. I tried to whip my head out. An ant, poor startled little bastard, fell on my face. My arm kind of locked my head under the cabinet.

I dropped the flashlight. Who'd want to see? All those big ants . . . crawling over each other, falling onto me . . . looking for another way out.

I would say that I was a crazy person for at least the next half hour. Scouring the cabinet with whatever toxins I could find. Scrubbing with Mr. Clean and Mrs. Lysol, until the bathroom smelled like a kerosene lamp.

I talked to them. Said I was going to get them. Oh, each one of you little bastards, I got you now, I got you --

But let me draw the curtain on this episode.

The point is this. It was invaluable -- pure gold. It was later transmogrified into an absolutely stellar

episode in my book.

A writer has to think like that. If it's horrible, insane, crazy, overwhelming, mad, bizarre -- if it pushes your mind to the outer edge and beyond (as John Newland might have said in the golden years of TV), it's

grist for your mill.

We're all crazy -- potentially. We're all held together by stickum and glue.

Writers know that. And now, so do you.

Postscript: next time, the death of horror, and why rumors of its passing are greatly exaggerated. Also, a look at the best H.P. Lovecraft reprint ever -- all aboard for Antarctic

-- CD

"Costello delivers!"

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paul sammon's



ROUGH CUTS

I think I'm on to something.

Last time out we examined two films orbiting the rim of the generic solar system, movies entitled *Idaho Transfer* and *In A Glass Cage*. As you may recall, these reviews were actually excerpts from my upcoming Prentice/Hall book, *Blood and Rockets: The 500 Best Science Fiction, Fantasy and Horror Films on Videocassette* (now due out early summer 1992).

And you know what?

You liked them.

Frankly, I was a bit taken aback; after all (I thought), these were motion pictures more slanted towards the adventurous film buff than the average viewer. But the calls I've subsequently received since last column's appearance, comments from folks like Rex (Slob) Miller and Chas (Deep Red) Balun, have convinced me I was wrong. There seems to be a widening audience of jaded cassette renters out there, people bored or unexcited by the latest mainstream releases and/or all those overexposed classics, and the common thread these burned-out fans kept reiterating went something like this:

"Give us the different stuff!"

Your command is my wish.

First, though, let me quickly list some new video releases which you should

be watching at home if you didn't catch them first-run at your local theater (and you *do* try to initially see movies in a theater, don't you?) No matter how wonderful your videocassette or laserdisc system, no matter how state-of-the-art your home theater setup has become, nothing, repeat, *nothing* can currently replace the experience of watching films on a big screen in a conventional theater. This was recently again brought home to me when, through the good graces of a film collector friend, I was fortunate enough to see a pristine 35mm anamorphic print of Roger Corman's *Masque of the Red Death* within a good-sized screening room. Lemme tell ya, it made the Lightning Video print of *Masque* look like cropped 'n chopped, pastel-colored shit).

Anyway, here's that recently released home video list (with directors), one you should consider next time you waltz on down to your local cassette emporium:

Darkman (Sam Raimi)
Frankenstein *Unbound*
(Roger Corman)
Gremlins 2 (Joe Dante)
Wild At Heart (David "Build-
ing A Franchise Fast" Lynch)
The Witches (Nicholas Roeg)

The laser disc freaks among you (of which I am one) should also note that the Voyager Company finally seems to have worked out most (but not all) of the glitches which marred their initial CAV release of *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*. Depending on your system, this programmable Criterion Collection of *CE3K* was supposed to allow you to manipulate the chapter stops on your laser player so that you could run either the original theatrical version of Spielberg's classic or punch in the subsequent reedited and expanded *Close Encounters: The Special Edition*. Unfortunately, Voyager's first pressing didn't quite do that. So they recalled their initial disc and pounded out the kinks. Look for a small paper pamphlet packaged within the gatefold covers of the latest *Close Encounters* disc -- this booklet explains how to program both versions of the film, and its presence (no such pamphlet went out the first time) guarantees that you've found Voyager's second and improved pressing of *CE3K/CE3K*. While we're at it, let's also give a hearty round of applause to Don Shay, friend, gentleman and editor of the consistently top-notch special effects magazine *Cinefex*. Don worked closely with Criterion to include much of the supplemental,

behind-the-scenes info you'll only find on the *CE3K* laserdisc.

But enough already.

Here, as per your request, is one more fringe film which will appear in *Blood and Rockets*. It's just the thing to keep your mind off the recent, sorry spectacle of the United States pounding the shit out of an underdeveloped Third World country called Iraq and then congratulating itself on its "bravery" (you remember instead of "neutralizing" Saddam Hussein, we killed tens of thousands of his civilians). It's enough to drive you mad -- more and more America reminds me of a dysfunctional family lorded over by an alcoholic father named George Bush. What I mean is, look around at the problems in our own country.

Talk about *denial* . . .

Weren't prepared for that political slap, were you?

Well, what did you expect from the article which calls itself -- "Not your ordinary film column?"

BRAIN DEAD (1989). *.**
Color. 84 minutes.

Videocassette Source: MGM/
UA Home Video

Director: Adam Simon

Producer: Julie Corman

Screenplay: Charles
Beaumont, Adam Simon

Based on A Story By: Charles
Beaumont

Cinematography: Ronn
Schmidt

Music: Peter Francis Rotter

Special Makeup Effects: Barney
Burman, Rob Burman

Starring: Bill Pullman, Bill
Paxton, Bud Cort, Patricia Charbon-
neau, Nicholas Pryor, George Ken-
nedy

Genre: Science fiction/hor-
ror (insanity)

For the hardcore fan there's
no finer thrill than stumbling across
a genuine sleeper, a distinctive little

movie you've read or heard nothing
about that zangs in out of nowhere
and suddenly validates all the wasted,
disappointing hours you've spent
watching dreck. And to find such a
gem on video is like stumbling onto a
single, beautiful rose . . . one growing
out of a manure pile.

Brain Dead's that kind of
movie.

Neurosurgeon Dr. Martin (Bill
Pullman) is persuaded by a corpo-
rate friend (Bill Paxton) to retrieve
an important formula from the
memory of psychopathic mathematician
Dr. Halsey (Bud Cort). There's
only one problem; Martin's method
of retrieval entails an untested surgi-
cal procedure, one which could pos-
sibly lobotomize Halsey if Martin
miscalculates. The surgery proceeds
anyway, and Halsey is seemingly
cured. But why does Dr. Martin
suddenly start to hallucinate?

"Am I a man dreaming that I
am a butterfly, or a butterfly dream-
ing that I am a man?" That famous
riddle comes from the third century
B.C. Chinese writer Chuang Tse, and
is the philosophical bedrock upon
which *Brain Dead* rests (it also ex-
plains the film's second-to-last shot).
Yes, I said "philosophical." For de-
spite its science fictional and horror/
mystery/thriller/anti-corporate
trappings, *Brain Dead* is actually
nothing less than an examination of
reality itself.

Having written that, don't be
put off. *Brain Dead* isn't just an ab-
sorbing intellectual exercise; you can
also enjoy it on a number of other
levels.

Science fiction addicts will take
to *Brain Dead's* surgical concepts.
Fans of Bud Cort, those who've been
wondering whatever happened to
their eccentric hero after he made
Harold and Maude and *Brewster
McCloud*, will here discover one of
Cort's meatiest, far-ranging roles.
Rock fans will encounter two songs
by actor Bill Paxton's band Martini
Ranch, titled "Brain Dance" and
"Mystic Revelation" (a note of expla-
nation; although he's probably best

known for his energetic portrayals of
a cowardly space marine in *Aliens*
and good-ole-boy vampire in *Near
Dark*, Bill Paxton has a second and
ongoing career as an LA-based rock
musician).

There's more.

Mystery buffs should enjoy
Brain Dead because they'll be busy
trying to figure out just what the hell
is going on -- you see, after Pullman
operates on Cort, the movie makes a
mystifying left turn, as Dr. Martin
not only starts to see horrible visions
but suspects that a conspiracy is being
mounted to put him in a mental hos-
pital. And horror fans will like the
brain operations themselves, where
sizzling hot probes dig deep into the
meaty recesses of exposed craniums.
Finally, effects fans will enjoy the
surreal sight of a skinned and blink-
ing human face stretched across a
wire frame, one that's sitting on a
scientist's desk (a face portrayed by
Barney Burman, who executed *Brain
Dead's* makeup effects along with
his brother Rob. Incidentally, Bar-
ney and Rob are the sons of Tom
Burman, another makeup effects
specialist who worked on such pic-
tures as *Planet of the Apes* and the
*Cat People/Invasion of the Body
Snatchers* remakes).

So do you see what I mean?
There's lots goin' on here . . . cer-
tainly more than you've come to
expect from obscure video releases.

Brain Dead was produced by
Roger Corman's Concorde Pictures,
a company which, in the finest Cor-
man tradition, is still grinding out a
yearly slate of ultra-low budget genre
and exploitation films. Unfortunately,
the lack of funds show on *Brain Dead*;
this film is pitted with rough patches.
The sound recording is somewhat
spotty, the editing is erratic (certain
shots don't match), and there are
hilarious continuity errors.

Huh? "Continuity?" Whaz-
zat?

Well, "continuity" refers, for
example, to filmmakers making sure
that if someone picks up a cigarette
in their right hand in one shot, it stays

in that right hand throughout the rest of the scene. But watch *Brain Dead's* Patricia Charbonneau lounging on her bed in a revealing slip. One second her thigh is revealed, the next second it's demurely covered up. Then it's showing again! She hasn't moved, either.

But *Brain Dead's* technical sloppiness doesn't really get in the way. Director Adam Simon has done a good job with his limited resources, wisely focusing in on character and plot. He also litters the film with all manner kinds of verbal tricks and visual clues (look quickly for Paxton/Charbonneau's subtle appearances as asylum inmates towards the end of the picture. And doesn't the evil corporation's name of "Eunice" sound an awful lot like "Youness"?). What's more, Simon has taste -- *Brain Dead* is based on an idea by Charles Beaumont, an American scenarist and horror story virtuoso who died in 1967 (see this entry's TRIVIA NOTE). Beaumont/Simon really lead you down the garden path here; by the end of the movie, you recognize that *everything* you've seen in *Brain Dead* is subject to doubt.

I realize I'm giving you very few plot details concerning this film, but that's intentional. Half of *Brain Dead's* fun lies in trying to follow the twists and turns of its increasingly fragmented story--eventhough some viewers might find this picture incomprehensible to the point of tedium. My advice is to *not* try to figure it all out, at least not while you're watching it. Turn off your mind, go with the flow, and let *Brain Dead* wash all over you. After "The End" comes up, *then* do your analyzing. You might start thinking along these lines:

Is Dr. Martin sane? Insane? Paranoid? A victim? By *Brain Dead's* climax, you still won't know. Our world is what we perceive it to be *at the moment*, even if that's an incorrect perception, or one we've had forced upon us by someone else. And *that's* the film's frightening point.

So check out *Brain Dead*. Be-

lieve me, it's not what you expect. Besides, who would have ever thought that *Roger Corman* would release a motion picture whose fundamental concern is a knotty meditation on the very fabric of reality?

Hea-ry, Rog!

..

TRIVIA NOTE: *Brain Dead* scripter Charles Beaumont was no stranger to the worlds of fantasy/horror. An influential and well-known genre contributor during the 1960s, Beaumont wrote many of the original *Twilight Zone* episodes, including "The Howling Man" (Satan locked up in an old monastery), "The Jungle" (Charles Dehner as a disbeliever menaced by voodoo in contemporary Manhattan), and the 1962 episode "Person or Persons Unknown" (a segment which greatly resembles *Brain Dead*; Richard Long plays a hungover man who wakes up one morning to discover a world where nobody knows him). Beaumont also supplied the screenplays for Corman's *The Haunted Palace* and *The Masque of the Red Death*, which explains Corman's knowledge of the unfinished *Brain Dead* project, one which director Adam Simon completed twenty-two years after Beaumont's death.

How did he die?

Strangely.

Charles Beaumont passed away from the ravages of a true-life disease just as grotesque as anything he put down on paper. In 1964 Beaumont contracted a form of progeria, a rare and terrible ailment whose strangest symptom is premature aging. Three years later, Beaumont passed on. He was only 38 years old.

But he looked like a hundred.

-- CD

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EASY'S LAST STAND

NANCY A. COLLINS

NANCY A. COLLINS is the award-winning author of *Sunglasses After Dark* and *Temptor*. She has sold short fiction to *Midnight Graffiti*, *COLD BLOOD*, *Hot Blood II*, *Pulphouse*, and many other publications. The following novelette is a real treat -- funny and scary.

"I want to fuck my mother; isn't that naughty of me?"

"I really can't say, Floyd, until you give me your credit card number and its expiration date."

"Tell me it's naughty! Tell me it's bad: the worst thing in the world! The worst thing you've ever heard!"

"Floyd--"

"I won't give you the number if you don't tell me it's dirty."

Sandra rolled her eyes. If it was up to her, she'd hang up on the little perv. She'd never seen Floyd before in her life. Never would. She pictured him as a middle-aged CPA in Sans-A-Belts slacks, leather oxfords and the wrong color tie. It was also certain he had a platinum AmEx card, and that's what really mattered.

The Gaboochi Brothers, her employers, liked to eavesdrop on the line now and again, to make sure everyone observed proper procedure. It wouldn't do to have the girls insulting the customers. Or giving away too much for free. She could tell from Floyd's shallow, nasal breathing that he was whacking off, but she didn't dare cut the line before getting his card number.

"Yeah, it's the most horrible thing I've ever heard," she lied. This seemed to be what Floyd wanted to hear, as the sound of one hand clapping rapidly increased and he moaned something under his breath.

"Now, about that card number . . ."

click.

Sandra swore into the mouthpiece of her headset. She should have known better. Why give the cow your AmEx number when you can get the milk for free? Usually she was better at spotting the jerk-offs, as she liked to call them; the guys interested in getting their rocks off before you could snag their credit card numbers.

She'd been working for Easy's Hot Talk for three months, long enough to give her seniority in the call room and gain a boost in pay. \$5.50 an hour. Not bad for work that consisted largely of sitting on your ass talking on the phone. Granted, you had to talk to some really sick

puppies but, as Gloria was fond of saying, "you knew the job was dangerous when you took it, Fred."

Easy's Hot Talk was a phone sex joint. Well, not really. Actually, the women harnessed to the state-of-the-art telemarketing headgear and multi-line telephone banks weren't hired to help lonely, faceless men achieve long-distance sexual fulfillment, although the classified ads salted in the back of skin mags like *HOT MILK*, *BIG BAD MAMAS*, *CATFIGHT QUARTERLY*, and *GIRLS WITH CUNT LIPS THE SIZE OF SADDLEBAGS*, certainly gave that impression:

Hi! I'm Easy! I've got a HOT, NASTY TONGUE and I want to make U cum! I know what men like and I've got what men want! I'll make you EXPLODE with PLEASURE! Call now for WILD UNTAMED phone sex! Call anytime! I'm ALWAYS there for you! 1-900-468-8255 (HOT-TALK)

The come-on hooked them but good; hundreds of hot and horny readers called the 900 number, the vast majority of them at night. Instead of the oozing, cooing sex-doll shown cradling a telephone receiver at an inappropriate angle for conversation, the callers got an operator with a prepared speech designed to be mildly titillating without being actually obscene. Each "Hot Talker" was under orders to sell the caller a list of "secret phone numbers" for a nominal fee (charged to their credit cards, of course) along with "candid photos" of "Easy" frolicking with her friends.

The phone numbers "sold" to the callers were really pre-recorded tapes of Gloria reading letters from *PENTHOUSE HOT TALK*. To top it off, the callers were billed three dollars a minute, including time spent on hold.

It was a blatant rip-off and the Gaboochi Brothers made money hand over fist. The operation had been around since the late 70s, but with the increase of herpes, penicillin-resistant gonorrhea, and AIDS, business was booming like never before.

Barnum was right; there is one born every minute. But Sandra wondered how, since it seemed half of America was into one-handed telephone conversations.

She decided it was time for a brief respite from the perverts of America's heartland and removed her headset. Gloria frowned at her from the foot of the huge table. Sandra mouthed the words *gotta pee* and made her way to the hall.

Easy's Hot Talk was located in a nondescript one-story single-family dwelling that had been converted, for all practical purposes, into a twenty-four hour answering service. The house was just beyond the city limits, in an unincorporated section that was a no-man's land of third-hand auto dealerships, after hour pool-halls, and tail-gate flea markets. The Gaboochi Brothers' prize operation wasn't illegal, but it didn't exactly have a Better Business Bureau sign hanging in the front window.

Sandra glanced back into the call-room; cigarette smoke hung over the table like mosquito netting. Most of the women chain-smoked while on duty, Sandra included. Non-smokers tended to quit after a couple of days. If any of the poor sweaty-handed bastards who surrendered their Visa, MasterCard and AmEx numbers (the Gaboochis didn't accept Discover) could see who was answering the phone for Easy (she of the silicone injections and artfully spread labia) they'd never get it up again.

She'd talked to enough desperate college students and terminally aroused hicks to know most of them thought they were going to talk to the woman pictured in the ad, or one of her so-called "friends," when they called. In reality no one, not even the Gaboochi Brothers, knew who Easy was. She was some bimbo who posed nude for a semi-pro photographer sometime during the 70s and had signed a model's release.

The operators fielding Easy's eager suitors were mostly housewives and retirees. Sandra, at age twenty-seven, was one of the youngest women working the phones. Doris, grandmother of three, calmly knitted a sweater for her husband while reciting her spiel into the throat mike while Muriel chatted incessantly between calls about her ex-husbands. Nora snapped her wad of Dentine while she fiddled with her bouffant wig. Then there was Gloria, the Head Honcho.

If anyone could be said to dominate the call-room, it was her. Gloria weighed close to five hundred pounds, sat on two folding chairs, and sounded like Marilyn Monroe in heat. She'd been with the Gaboochi Brothers for a few years and rewarded with a promotion to night manager.

When Sandra had answered the ambiguously phrased ad for a "telephone sales woman," the first thing Gloria told her was: "We got three rules here: we don't take calls from minors; we don't take calls from women; and we don't take calls from guys with numbers on the Hot Card list." It seemed like a simple enough philosophy.

Gloria ran the show from eight in the evening to two in the morning, the heaviest calling period, and she didn't tolerate goofing off on her shift. Despite her insistence on treating Easy's Hot Talk like a legitimate business, Sandra and the others liked her. Gloria, unlike the day manager, wasn't scared of the Gaboochis and wasn't above making jokes at their expense. She would

also send one of the girls out for doughnuts or pizza if the mood struck her, something frowned on during the day when the Gaboochis might stop by in person to check on business.

The bathroom door opened and ZuZu stepped out, tugging on her leather miniskirt. Of the entire group, the only one that looked like a pin-up girl was ZuZu, if you ignored the yin-yang tattooed on her skull (bisected by a magenta mohawk) and the collection of gold rings piercing her ears, nose, belly-button and labia.

"Hey, Sandy! Howzit going, girlchick?"

"Got the weekend off to catch your gig!" ZuZu fronted her own all-female thrash band, ZuZu's Petals. That weekend they were opening for the Butthole Surfers at the local hardcore venue. ZuZu claimed the only reason she worked for "pigs like the Gaboochis" was to raise the cash for a Stratocaster. She'd been there almost a year.

"Awright! Better get back to the yoke before Big Mama starts losing her cool. Catch you later, Sandy."

As she washed her hands at the sink, Sandra froze as a shadow flickered across the frosted window pane. She hurried from the bathroom and back into the call-room. Gloria looked up when she entered and frowned even deeper than before, causing chain reactions in her chins.

"We got company, Gloria."

"Shit. You sure?"

"Pretty sure. He was standing outside the bathroom window."

Gloria grunted and pressed her strangely small hands against the tabletop, levering her vast bulk onto her elephantine legs. Not only was Gloria fat, she was big too, towering a head taller than Sandra. The metal folding chairs seemed to groan in relief as she stood up. Sandra stepped back, momentarily overwhelmed by the body heat radiating from the other woman. Gloria seemed to sweat all the time, even in the winter.

"Better wake up Carl, then. I'll call the Brothers."

Technically, Carl was one of the Gaboochis, but in the same way Gummo was one of the Marx Brothers. Carl was the youngest Gaboochi and by far the least motivated of the family; he slept in one of the rooms during the night-shift and his job was to chase off unwanted visitors. It was an undemanding job, it kept Carl out of trouble, and it theoretically involved him in the family business. The Hot Talkers didn't resent Carl's presence; unlike his elder siblings, Carl was occasionally useful. Jealous boyfriends and outraged husbands were fairly common, as were the occasional lust-struck callers hungry to meet Easy in the flesh. While the Gaboochis didn't advertise their comings and goings, the location of Easy's Hot Talk was something of an open secret.

Usually the sight of Carl, baseball bat in hand, was enough to chase off any would-be trouble makers. Sandra banged on a door marked "General Manager".

"Carl! Wake up, damn it! We got a prowler!"

There was some muttering and after a couple of seconds Carl Gaboochi opened the door, revealing the "General Manager's" office to be a mess of stale beer cans, empty bologna wrappers, and dog-eared Louis L'Amour paperbacks. He wore a pair of grungy blue jeans and a smelly Harley Davidson t-shirt.

"Wuzzit?"

"Gloria told me to tell you to check the perimeter. Someone's sneaking around outside."

Carl seemed to wake up a little more. "Izzit that dumb-ass motherfucker again?" he yawned, showing the gap where his front teeth used to be. A couple of weeks ago the boyfriend of one of the new girls decided to try and save her from eternal damnation by dragging her, kicking and screaming, out of the house. Carl had been forced to separate the boyfriend's cowboy hat from his skull the hard way.

"I don't think so. Charlene quit a couple of days ago."

"Get back t'work. I'll take care of it." Carl reached behind the door to his office and retrieved a Louisville Slugger with a taped handle.

Damn it, can't a guy sleep in peace around here? Carl mused as he unlocked the front door. As if it wasn't bad enough his jerk-wad brothers had him baby sitting a gaggle of old biddies . . . He stifled another yawn and scratched himself. Still, it was better than bouncing at the after-hours joint.

He stepped onto the lawn, the dew wet under his feet, squinting into the darkness. A couple hundred yards from the front door was the old highway. The traffic was light and infrequent after ten o'clock.

"Anybody out here?" Carl bellowed in his best mean-ass redneck voice. "If y'are, y'all better git 'fore I find you!" Carl walked around the corner towards the rear of the house, swinging his Louisville Slugger with each stride. He wasn't really expecting to find anyone in the bushes. Usually one look at him brandishing his bat, was all it took to scare off the little rubber-dicks. Mostly they were high school kids who somehow got it into their thick heads that the place was some kind of bordello.

There was the sound of a heel slipping on gravel behind him and Carl spun in time to see the hunting knife, then it was too late to see anything else.

**

Gloria took the call.

"Hi, I'm Easy!" she said, trying to make the prepared speech as suggestive as possible. She'd recited the same damn spiel so many times since she'd first come to work for the Gaboochi Brothers that it'd become something of a mantra for her. *Hi, I'm Easy! Hi, I'm Easy! Hi, I'm Easy!* She often went to bed with those three words looped into her thoughts.

"Hello, Easy. It's me." There was something about the caller's voice that made her pause. "I've been waiting to talk to you for a long time."

"Is that so? Well, I want to talk to you, *too*." If you're interested in women who know what you want--"

"Cut the sales pitch, bitch." The voice on the other end of the phone grew hard, sharp thorns. "I'm wise to the game you're playing."

Oh-oh. Dissatisfied customer.

"You thought I was stupid, didn't you? Thought I wouldn't catch on to the shit you were trying to pull on me, huh? I bet you don't even *remember* me, do you? You don't even remember me asking you if I'd get to talk to you or some fucking machine. You said I'd get to talk to *you*. To someone *real*. You lied to me, bitch!" The voice grew shriller, biting her ear with needle-point teeth. "You're a slut, just like the others." The caller's voice suddenly was cold and flat, like a metal wall. "So be it. But you should have known better. You know I don't scare that easy." He chuckled at some private joke.

"What do you mean?" Gloria let the sugar-and-spice coating slip.

"I dealt with your boyfriend. Or was he your pimp."

"What are you talking about?"

"Why don't you look on the back porch?"

Dead air.

Gloria stared at the telephone for a few seconds before slipping her head-set off. She could see Sandra and Doris staring at her.

"Sandy, where's Carl?"

"He went to check out the prowler. Why?"

Doris paused in her knitting. "What's the matter, Gloria?"

"Nothing. Just a crank call, that's all."

"Oh. *I hate* those." Doris clucked as she continued her knitting. "People can be so rude and thoughtless."

"Excuse me a minute, ladies. Nature calls." Gloria heaved herself out of her chairs and waddled out of the phone room. She tried not to move any faster than usual. It wouldn't do to call attention to herself.

You're a slut, just like all the others.

There was probably nothing to the call; nothing to worry about. Easy got "her" fair share of threats and weird calls, at least two or three a week, but so far there'd been nothing to them.

Instead of heading toward the bathroom, Gloria doglegged into the kitchen. A Mr. Coffee machine and a microwave oven sat on the counter, alongside cardboard boxes full of plain brown envelopes stuffed with xeroxed nude photos and advertisements for french ticklers, full-sized love-dolls and other rubber goods. The Gaboochi Brothers made most of their money in the mail-order sex-aid business and selling their ever-growing mailing lists to like-minded entrepreneurs for a nickel an address.

Gloria prided herself on being tough-minded. By



the time she'd graduated from high school she knew a woman of her size didn't stand much of a chance in a society that valued physical beauty. She'd been denied any number of jobs, even though her credentials were impeccable, simply because she didn't fit in with the company's "look". The diplomas and degrees didn't amount to shit. She tried dieting, even going so far as to seriously consider having her mouth wired shut, but nothing did any good.

Working for the Gaboochi Brothers, helping sustain Easy's fictional life, was the closest she'd ever come to getting any real respect. The Brothers treated their employees indifferently, but Gloria had coerced them into acknowledging her business know-how enough to let her run the show as she saw fit.

just like all the others.

Gloria was wheezing, sweat running down her face and plastering her bangs to her forehead, by the time she reached the back door. Her ankles ached from moving her bulk the fifty or so feet from the call-room. She fumbled with the deadbolts and tried not to think about what the mystery caller meant by "the others".

Carl lay sprawled across the bare planks of the back porch, gutted like a fish. Gloria stared at the sticky blackness radiating from his mangled body like a reverse-negative halo. The porch smelled like a butcher shop.

I won't scream. I won't scream.

"Gloria . . . ?"

It's him. It's gotta be. No one else could have done

that to Carl.

She slammed the door shut, leaning against it as she fumbled with the deadbolts and burglar chains. The newspaper headlines swam behind her eyelids, taunting her.

They called him the Judge because his victims were prostitutes and each had been found with a moral pronouncement carved into their lifeless flesh. He'd claimed six victims in the last fourteen months.

"Gloria? What's the matter?" Sandra was standing in the kitchen doorway.

"What are you doing away from your station?" Gloria snapped, hoping to shift the younger woman's attention away from her nervousness.

"It's the phone line--"

"What about it?"

"It's been disconnected."

The lights went out.

..

"What th' fuck's goin on here? First th' phones go dead, now the electricity cuts out!" ZuZu pulled off her head-set and tossed it onto the table. The other women in the room were asking the same questions, all of them talking at once. ZuZu snorted in disgust; they sounded like a bunch of damn hens clucking away in the dark.

"Where's Gloria?"

"She said something about going to th' john just

before the lights went out," Muriel explained. "Geez, I wish Albert was here. He was my third husband. Wasn't much in bed, but he sure was handy 'round the house. That man could change a fuse faster'n you could say Jack Robinson!"

ZuZu rolled her eyes. She could see the fat lady falling down in the confusion of the black-out and not being able to get back up again, like one of those giant turtles. No doubt Muriel could find a corresponding anecdote from one of her disastrous marriages for *that*, too.

"Maybe there's a tornado warning out," Doris mused aloud in her patented June Cleaver voice. "It's that time of year, you know."

ZuZu pushed herself away from her station. "Probably some drunk bozo piled up his car into a transformer somewhere up the line. I'm gonna go get my lunch outta th' fridge before it starts to defrost. Anybody else want something outta th' kitchen?"

"Stay put, ZuZu! I don't want any of you ladies wandering around in the dark."

Gloria filled the doorway, a plastic flashlight gripped in her left hand. She shifted to one side to allow Sandra to squeeze into the room, her arms loaded with what looked to be second-hand sporting equipment.

"What th' hell's goin on here?" drawled Nora, her mouth still working the ever-present cud of Dentine.

"We got us a problem, ladies."

"No shit, Sherlock."

Gloria shot ZuZu a look that made her feel like she was back in second grade.

Sandra's face was wan in the light cast by the flashlight. "She's not kidding, Zu. We're in deep shit. Carl's dead."

There was a moment of silence, then everybody started talking at the same time. Gloria waved at them to be quiet.

"Carl's dead! It's true! Some sicko laid him open like a catfish!"

"But who'd do a thing like that?" gasped Muriel.

"I'm not sure, but I think it's the Judge."

Doris looked perplexed, her knitting forgotten. "But I thought he only killed, you know, women of ill repute. Why would he want to hurt *us*?"

"Some guys have a real broad definition of what constitutes bein' a whore, honey," sighed ZuZu.

"I'm afraid ZuZu's right. Just before the lights went out, I got a call from whoever it is who killed Carl. I guess he was using a car phone. Anyway, it's pretty obvious he's got a grudge against Easy."

"What are we gonna do? We can't protect ourselves against a crazy man," Nora whimpered. "I wish my man Gus was here. He'd know what to do--"

"Bullshit! If Gus were here he'd be passed out under the table by now!" ZuZu spat.

"How *dare* you talk about Gus that way!" Nora's

buffant wiggled with rage. "You no-count whore! *You're* the one he ought to be goin' after! Not us!"

"Ladies, ladies, please!" Gloria held up her hands for silence. "Look, I know you're all scared. So am I. But I *did* put a call into the Brothers about the prowler before the phone line was cut. They'll try and call back, sooner or later. You know those guys. But until help arrives, we've got to make sure this loony-toon doesn't hurt anyone else, right?"

"Fuckin' A!"

"That's m'girl, Zu!" Gloria grinned. "Sandy found this stuff in Carl's office. See what you can find to protect yourself."

There was barely enough light for everyone to see the half-assed arsenal spread across the tabletop; one cracked baseball bat, a field hockey stick with green plastic tape wrapped around the handle, a fishing reel and a badly rusted tire-tool.

"I realize it's not very promising, but anything's better than defending ourselves with our bare hands," Gloria said. "Look, I don't know what this crackpot is going to do or how he's going to do it, but I'm willing to bet he doesn't know how many of us are actually here."

Nora frowned at the weathered bat she held in her neatly manicured hands. "But he's already killed Carl. If he can do that, what difference does it make how many of us there are?"

Gloria slammed her fist against the table. "Sweet Jesus, woman! Just because he killed Carl doesn't mean we have to stand around and wait for him to slit our throats like a bunch of damn sheep! Yeah, he killed Carl. Carl was bigger and stronger than any three of us put together, but Carl was *stupid*, Nora! That's how the Judge got the drop on him. Besides, you want to be found stark naked with your guts hanging around your knees and the word "slut" carved on your backside for the whole world to see?"

..

The Judge wormed his way through the attic, searching for what he knew must be there. In the dim light spilling past the ventilation grid he'd forced open, he could make out the collapsible stairway that opened onto the house downstairs. He grinned, ignoring the dust swirling in his nostrils. He would not sneeze or cough. Those were affectations for mere mortals, not avenging angels of the Lord. Or was he working for Satan? The Judge occasionally forgot exactly whose greater glory he was striving to promote.

It was probably the Lord's this time out, so that meant he was an avenging angel.

The Judge's real name was Oscar Rudolph Welcome. He was forty-seven years old. He had been married for three months during the 70s, before his grandmother had the union annulled. He'd been many

things during his adult life; part-time clerk in the family business. But what he really excelled at was being a full-time psychotic. He was very good at that.

He had been born illegitimate back before being a single parent was considered a viable alternative lifestyle. His mother worked at the U.S.O. and, apparently, believed in doing her bit to make sure America's brave lads wanted for nothing. She dumped her unwelcome Welcome at the gate of the family estate and was never heard from again, although Oscar's grandmother delighted in reporting all kinds of mischief her prodigal daughter was involved in.

She once told Oscar that she'd received "irrefutable proof" that his mother had been tied into the Rosenberg scandal and that she'd gotten the information from a special radio she kept hidden under her pillow. Oscar believed everything his grandmother said. After all, she was a saint. And his mother was a slut, therefore, capable of any treachery imaginable.

Sluts were not to be trusted. Sluts will betray without a moment's thought. Sluts grow bored and ruin your life just to amuse themselves. Sluts want nothing but money. Sluts will take all you have and laugh in your face. They think they are so smart. Like that slut-of-sluts, Easy.

He could see her lolling about on a pile of red satin pillows, dressed in a flimsy peignoir, stuffing her cherry-red mouth full of bon-bons as she bilked foolish, lust-crazed men of their credit card numbers. The vision was so sharp, so *real* he could smell the scent of masticated chocolate on her breath as she screamed.

The Judge closed his eyes and punched his crotch, rebuking his traitorous flesh. But even the memory of his grandmother screaming *What's this? What's this?!*, grabbing his tumescent penis in her dry, wrinkled hands, could not banish the longings inside him. Only the smell of blood and the sensation of flesh parting beneath his knife would douse the fire in his veins.

And only one person's blood would do.

Easy was the one. Easy must die.

..

He came in through the attic trap-door, riding the collapsible stairway like a magic carpet. It was dark, but there was no way anyone living could ignore the squeal of rusty springs and the slam of the stairwell folding back on itself as the Judge made his entrance. Not that it mattered. The Judge *wanted* Easy to hear. Wanted her to know that he had penetrated, in the first of many senses, her inner sanctum. He wanted her to know that he had come to collect the wages of sin. And he expected what was due him.

The Judge wrinkled his nose, sniffing the bordello's air. Funny. The place reeked of sweat and cigarette smoke, mixed with the odor of spilled coffee

grounds. The Judge had never really been inside a whore house before, but he'd always imagined they smelled more of sex and cheap French perfume. This place smelled like a secretarial pool.

Moving into a darkened doorway, he brushed against what seemed to be a kitchen counter-top, knocking a cardboard box onto the floor. The Judge stared at the material spread across the warped linoleum. Blurry xeroxes of naked young girls, their ill-defined labia spread in an approximation of wanton invitation, leered up at him.

What's this?! *What's this?!* His grandmother's voice vibrated against his inner-ear like a dentist's drill-bit.

Shadows moved in the shadows, jerking the Judge's attention from the filth spread at his feet. He pounced and pulled the slut from her hiding place.

Stupid! Stupid slut! Didn't she know it was useless to hide from the All-Seeing Eyes of the Lord's Divine Punisher? He held the struggling slut by her hair. She stopped trying to free herself when he showed her the knife.

"Repent, slut!"

"Young man, I am *not* a slut!"

The Judge frowned and stared harder at his captive. She was in her sixties and dressed conservatively. She looked almost grandmotherly. The kill-lust dimmed. The Judge blinked in confusion. He hadn't expected this.

"Let go of me!" Doris snapped. And, to her surprise, the Judge obeyed. The huge knife held inches from her nose wavered, then disappeared. The Judge looked like a sleepwalker stirred from a dream.

"Granny?"

Doris stabbed her knitting needle into the killer's right shoulder.

The Judge shrieked, nearly dropping his knife, as he clawed at the needle piercing his shoulder.

Sluts cannot be trusted! Sluts betray! Remember that, boy! Have I ever lied to you? shrieked his grandmother.

Tears of anger and shame spilled down the Judge's twisted face. The false-grandmother was trying to escape through the back door, clawing frantically at the locks. He would not be fooled again! Ignoring the pain shooting through his wounded shoulder, the Judge advanced on his attacker.

There was a high-pitched whirring sound, like the drone of a mosquito, and something bit the Judge's left ear.

"Doris! Run for it!"

Muriel reeled in and was rewarded by the sight of a man with a knife twirling about on the end of the line, slapping at his ear like a flea-ridden hound. After all those years, the co-ed fishing trips her second husband, Ray, had insisted on had finally paid off! Muriel felt strangely proud of herself; when Ray was around she



never caught anything more exotic than crappie or bluegill; but now she had a real-live psycho-killer on the end of her hook!

The Judge flailed at the taut fishing line with his knife, trying to free himself before the hook completely bisected his ear. Blood was already running down the side of his face. That it was *his* blood enraged him all the more.

Doris darted past the snarling murderer and her fly-casting savior. Muriel dropped the rod and reel and hurried after her, leaving the Judge to claw at the hook buried in his ear.

He didn't know who these women were, but they weren't Easy. The Judge had expected there to be one, maybe two, women in the house, but he hadn't expected them to be waiting in ambush. And the two women -- he shook his head; no, not women, *sluts* -- he'd seen were hardly the big-titted, mush-brained whores he'd fantasized about. Unwanted thoughts kept intruding on his kill-lust, making his head hurt even more.

Ignoring the throbbing pain in his mangled ear, the Judge edged his way back into the hall. He stared at the three doors, two on the left, one on the right. Wary of another surprise attack, he tested the knob on the right-hand door. It was unlocked.

"Psst. Buddy! Why don't you try Door Number Two?"

The Judge turned on his heel in time to see a grinning savage with a ring in her nose swing a field hockey stick at his head.

"Take *that*, you sexist motherfucker!"

He was blinded by the fireworks going off inside his head, but still struck out at the crazed she-demon. He heard her cry out and felt her blood on his fingers. The Judge smiled. After a bad start, things were finally turning out the way they should!

When the fireworks died away, he found himself alone in the hallway. The field hockeystick lay abandoned on the floor. The bathroom door stood open. So that's where the she-demon had been hiding. The Judge touched his forehead gingerly. The pain from the contusion fed his righteous anger. He would cut the ring from the scheming hell-slut's nose and skin the tattoos from her flesh. They would make wonderful souvenirs.

He grimaced as blood and sweat trickled into his eyes. Fuck stalking. They knew he was here. He knew they were here. It was time to announce his intentions.

"Easy!"

Silence.

"I know you can hear me, bitch! I know you're here!" he bellowed. "I've come for you, like I said I would. I'm going to make you a deal, Easy.

I'm here for you. I'm not interested in the others. You're the one I want. If you surrender to me, I'll leave the others alone. I promise!"

It was a lie, of course. He had no intention of letting any of them go. Especially the slut with the ring in her nose. But everyone knows how stupid sluts are. There would be much blood tonight. Blood enough to wash himself clean of sin in the eyes of both the Lord and his grandmother.

"Easy! Answer me, bitch!"

The third door on the left opened, and the Judge made out a shadow lurking on the threshold.

"You looking for me?"

It was *her*. There was no mistaking that voice: smooth as fine brandy; smoky as a late-night cabaret; sleek as a silk kimono. Before him stood the author of his torment. The Whore of Babylon who had lured him into sullying his soul and his flesh with her promises of carnal gratification; the reason behind his phone bill averaging in the high triple-digits. His knife was hard and ready to taste her blood; ready to fuck her the only way he knew how.

"Easy." He breathed her name as if it was both benediction and curse.

"Yeah, I'm Easy," she said, stepping into the hall. "What's it to you, asshole?"

The Judge stared in horror at the massive woman blocking the door. Vast rolls of flab hung from her upper arms, chin, waist, and hips. Her face was slick with sweat and flushed the color of raw meat. Her breathing was ragged, as if she'd just climbed a flight of stairs. The knife between the Judge's legs shrivelled.

"Y-you're not Easy," he whimpered.

"Oh, but I *am*! And I want you out of my house!" Easy's voice coming out of the fat lady's mouth was disconcerting. Oscar Welcome was suddenly aware of the huge bruise over his left eye and the throbbing pain in his right shoulder. He wished the Judge would come back. When the Judge was in charge, pain didn't hurt like it usually did.

"But you *can't* be Easy!" Oscar shook his head, trying to clear it of the confusion. He felt the tears building in his eyes. The fat lady took another step towards him. She towered over him, threatening suffocation with her neolithic breasts. "Easy's supposed to be beautiful, and you're fat and ugly!"

"That's it. I've had all I'm gonna take outta you!" Gloria lunged forward, grabbing the Judge's knife-hand. "It's bad enough being terrorized by some sicko, but I'll be damned if I'm gonna stand here and let you call me names!"

Oscar struck instinctively at his attacker. He felt the knife sink into her flesh up to the hilt and heard the slut grunt in surprise and pain, but it just wasn't the same. There was no pleasure to be found in the tearing of her flesh. Not without the Judge to guide his hand.

Oscar struggled to free the knife, but it wouldn't come out. The false-Easy rolled her piggy little eyes, whether in pain or pleasure it was hard to tell, and clasped Oscar to her ample bosom, bearing him to the floor.

Oscar's last thought, before Gloria fell on him, was that it wasn't supposed to end this way.

..

Gloria came to in the hospital. The nurses lashed two of the beds together so she could rest easier. The first thing she saw was ZuZu, her right arm in a sling, grinning down at her.

"Hey! Boss-lady! You feelin' okay?"

"Not really."

Sandra bobbed into view behind ZuZu. "You're a hero, Gloria. You killed the Judge!"

"Killed--"

"Yeah! You squashed him like a bug," ZuZu elaborated with a ripe raspberry. "Guy was some kind of nutcase. They went to his house and found his granny's corpse rotting in the bedroom. Just like *Psycho*! I'm writing a song about it."

"That's nice . . . I think. I'm glad you weren't hurt. That was a damn foolish -- and brave -- stunt you pulled, young lady."

ZuZu blushed and shrugged her left shoulder. "Look who's talking. I'll have to lay off playing the guitar for a week or two, but the Doc says I should have a nice scar!"

"Sandy, what happened? The last thing I remember that bastard stuck a knife into my chest. I was sure I'd had it."

"The doctors said your fat kept the hunting knife from getting anywhere near your heart. If you looked like Easy, you'd be dead by now."

"What about the others?"

"Everybody's okay. Doris ran all the way to the juke joint down the highway and called the cops. Did you know she competes in the Senior Olympics? That old girl's really something. Muriel's got herself all excited about one of the paramedics. She says it's the Real Thing Part Five. The only person who got hurt, besides ZuZu, was Nora. Her no-good white trash live-in, Gus, finally found out what she was doing and blacked her eyes. He said it wasn't fit work for no lady."

"What about the Gaboochi Brothers?"

"They won't talk to the press. Something about the family being in mourning. But they sent you flowers." Sandra hoisted a pot of African violets. "See?"

Gloria sighed and rolled her eyes. "I'm more interested in whether we still have jobs."

"Why shouldn't we?"

"Can't you two figure it out for yourselves? When it gets out that the Hot Talkers are really a bunch of

housewives and Easy if actually a refugee from a side-show -- what do you think's gonna happen?"

"There goes my Strat!"

Gloria looked away, trying to control the emotion in her voice. "Easy's dead. That bastard killed her as sure as if he really *had* stuck a knife in her!" She eyed the i.v. drip running into her arm. "And here I am, flat on my back without health insurance."

"You're taking this too hard, Gloria. So what if Easy's dead? So what if you're out of a job? It sucked to begin with!"

"It's easy for *you* to talk like that, Sandy. You're young; you're *thin*."

"And you're rich. Or will be."

"What do you mean?"

Sandra held up a thick sheaf of legal-sized paper. "See this? It's a *contract*, Gloria! A *movie* contract! This guy from Universal Pictures was in here earlier, when you were still out of it. They want to make a movie about what happened." She handed the contract to Gloria, who squinted at it suspiciously.

"You're kidding. ZuZu, tell me she's kidding."

ZuZu grinned even wider than before. "It's true, boss-lady! We've *all* got contracts! Even Nora! Boy, is Gus gonna be pissed off when she tells him to pack his bags!"

Gloria stared at the contract, but she was no longer hearing what her friends were chattering about. From what little she was able to understand of the contract, it was obvious the studio sharpies thought they could get the rights to Easy's last stand on the cheap.

"Has anyone signed anything yet?"

"Huh? Uh, no . . . I don't think so."

"Good. We need to show a unified front on this, if we want to get the best of this deal. Sandy, get on the phone to Doris, Nora and Muriel. Tell 'em to hold off until I've had some time to scope out the deal."

"Aye-aye!" Sandy hurried out of the room.

"ZuZu, be a dear and see if you can't hunt me up a little something to eat. I think better when I'm eating."

ZuZu tilted her head to one side. With her colorful mohawk, she looked like a quizzical cockatoo. "Mind lettin' me in on the game plan, boss?"

Gloria grinned, visions of a Universal Studios office with her name on the door and a handsome young male secretary answering the phone taking on a certain clarity behind her eyes.

"Let's just say Hollywood producers aren't the only ones who know a thing or two about exploitation."

-- CD

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LORI PERKINS

DREADFUL PLEASURES

Sliver, Ira Levin, 190 pages, Bantam
American Psycho, Bret Easton Ellis, 399 pages, Vintage
The Weekend, Helen Zahavi, 197 pages, Donald I. Fine

I cannot tell you the joy and anticipation I felt when I learned that Ira Levin had published another novel after a 15 year hiatus. When I was a teenager, I thought he was the most wonderful writer in the entire library -- better than Jacqueline Susanne and Stephen King combined (we're talking about a fourteen-year-old's universe here).

Rosemary's Baby scared me half to death, especially since I lived in a creepy New York City apartment building filled with weird old people. *The Stepford Wives* made me wonder about a lot of my friend's mom's who were baking all those cookies in the 70s when they should have been going back to school. And, I confess, I even liked *This Perfect Day*, Levin's less than spectacular attempt at science fiction.

When I received my review copy of *Sliver* from Bantam (I heard they'd paid Levin some ungodly millions-of-dollars advance), I was a little disappointed by the cover, a plain silver background with an eye intersected by the V of the novel's black

lettering.

I was also surprised to see that the novel was so slim. I'd remembered his novels as being tomes, but maybe I was just recalling how heavy *This Perfect Day* had been.

I couldn't wait to read this sliver of a book. The jacket copy hinted that this novel was about some mysterious murders in a New York City apartment building, nicknamed "the horror highrise." Was Levin going to try a 90's version of *Rosemary's Baby*?

Unfortunately, the answer is no.

Sliver is the story of a spoiled, wealthy son of a movie star who owns a "sliver" building on New York's upper East Side and has a sick obsession with minding his tenant's business. By installing the latest video technology, this psycho manages to spy on anyone he chooses, and when any of his tenants become suspicious, he kills them.

That's it. You know who the murderer is within 70 pages, and it takes 120 pages to wrap this slim plot line up. On top of that, the novel is riddled with awful movie treatment sentences -- "turned his head, looked at her. Nodded." -- and repeating obnoxiously cute phrases such as describing the logo on a supermarket

shopping bag as "I heart New York" over and over again. As if that were not enough, this novel really falls apart when the denouement features a cat attacking the killer. No wonder Levin's been writing for Hollywood and Broadway for the past fifteen years. Readers just won't go for this kind of cartoon ending.

To say I was disappointed is an understatement. I was angry at Levin for palming off a trunk novel that wasn't even good enough for one of those implausible late 70's movies-of-the-week.

Fine. I made some more phone calls and got myself the manuscript of the controversial *American Psycho* by Bret Easton Ellis. I imagined that if this book were read as a horror novel, I would find it fit into a tradition that all those other reviewers were blind to. After all, I sold a horror anthology titled *Splat-terpunk*s.

Wrong again.

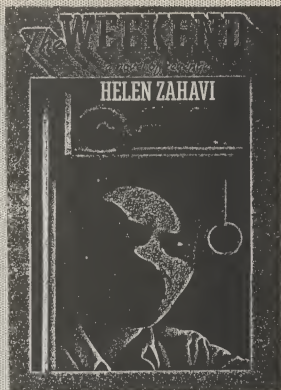
American Psycho could have been a powerful satire of a certain kind of materialistic abuse. Instead, it is an extremely poorly written catalogue of fashionable clothing, men's skin care products and Manhattan restaurant menus with a dozen uniquely original murders thrown in as if they were condiments at an In-

SLIVER



IRA LEVIN

Author of *ROSEMARY'S BABY* and *THE BOYS FROM BRAZIL*



dian restaurant. To even consider this as a horror novel would be an insult to the genre, because even the worst Leisure author knows more about plot, characterization and pacing of information than Ellis.

At about this point, someone asked me if I'd heard about *The Weekend* by Helen Zahavi, whom the British press had labeled a female Splatterpunk. This sounded like my kind of book.

And it was.

The Weekend is a surprisingly witty and well-written novel about a female serial killer in England's Brighton Beach. Mild-mannered, former prostitute Bella has had a lifetime of leering, rude men staring and poking at her. One day, after learning that a neighbor has been peeping at her all summer, and has the nerve to confront her in a park, she decides to fight back. She breaks

into his home while he sleeps, and gives his brain "a D and C" with a hammer.

Poor Bella just keeps on meeting more and more men who don't know the kind of woman she's become. She almost feels sorry for some of them. After suffocating a visiting academic in his hotel room after some mild S&M, she has to visit a dentist to fix a tooth loosened by the professor. The dentist offers to drive her home and then drive into her. She runs him over with his own Mercedes and then runs into a gaggle of British yuppies preparing to set afire to a bag lady in an alley. They never make it out of there.

There's more, of course. But the most important thing is that poor Bella doesn't stop or get caught at the end of the novel.

The writing is almost lyrical at times with doses of powerful female

wit. When buying a gun, she describes it as "the most user-friendly phallus there was." When someone asks her if she likes dogs, she thinks, "To her, all dogs are male, just as all cats are female. Dogs hunt in packs and stink out the house and grovel before their mistresses. They are natural fascists of the animal world. Stroke them and they bite your hand. Beat them and they love you forever." She describes a fat man as having "hips so wide, he could have had children. Magnificent, child-bearing hips."

Helen Zahavi is a powerful and welcome voice in a crowded theatre, and certainly one worth listening to.

-- CD



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JOE CITRO INTERVIEWS RICHARD WEILGOSH

PEOPLE IN THE SHADOWS

Did you ever ask yourself: *what are horror writers really afraid of?*

One good answer might be *reviewers*.

A common perception among writers, especially those just starting out, is that reviewers can make or break your career.

That may be true, but we must remember that reviewers are writers too, with varying degrees of talent, insight, and -- we've got to admit it -- clout.

Of course we all know Edward Bryant and Charles de Lint, but there are an awful lot of other people out there reviewing books for newspapers, magazines, fanzines, and even specialty catalogs.

I got to wondering, who are these people? What are they like? What sort of person aspires to review books and movies, especially *horror* books and movies?

Then I met Richard Weilgosh of Niagara Falls, New York. As a beginning reviewer, Rich is still in the shadows, but his career is picking up steam. His work has appeared in such noteworthy publications as *2 A.M.*, *The Blood Review*, *Nightmare Express*, *Quantum* and *OtherRealms*.

When we spoke at the 1990 NECON in Rhode Island, Rich struck me as a kind and thoughtful man who

shows a genuine appreciation for the books he reviews and for the people who write them. Though he speaks softly and chooses his words with care, his reviews reveal him to be highly opinionated about the publishing industry and its various trends. He has spoken out against garish and inappropriate covers (a subject close to my heart), and he articulates strong opinions about excessive sex and violence, including the so-called

"splatterpunk" movement (whatever that is?).

Occasionally, he'll step outside the "typical" reviewer's role by making such comments as, "this book would make a fine movie," or "this was the first time I ever read so-and-so. Now I'm going back to find their other books."

Rich wrote his first review in 1977. In his "other life" he has been



employed in marketing and sales for 24 years. He lives with his wife Sheryl, whom he describes as an "interviewer and an activist."

As you read this interview, please keep in mind that Rich, like all reviewers, is in the business of rendering opinions. The opinions he expresses here are not necessarily those of *Cemetery Dance* or this interviewer.

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CITRO: The words "Critic" and "Reviewer" are often used interchangeably. Is there a difference between the two?

WEILGOSH: To me a critic is someone who analyzes in depth what he or she is critiquing, a book or a play or whatever. They get into all the nuances of what that writer is trying to say. A reviewer is someone who just lightly evaluates a book. In other words, just says what he liked and didn't like about the book. And did the author accomplish what he set out to do?

CITRO: Probably the question most writers would like to ask a reviewer is: Just exactly what is it that qualifies you to say who's a good writer and who isn't, and what's a good book and what isn't?

WEILGOSH: That's a good question! I guess what qualifies me is that I'm a consumer. I go out and I buy the book. And if I like it, I'd like to tell people that I like it. If there's a book that's half and half, it's got some good points and it's got some bad points, I'll let people know about that. But basically what qualifies me? I'm a consumer and I want people to know what authors I particularly enjoy and why I enjoy them.

CITRO: In line with that, one could argue that it all comes down to personal taste. One reviewer will like a book, one won't. One reader will

like a book, one won't. So in a cosmic sense, what's the good of reviewers?

WEILGOSH: You're right, it is a matter of personal taste. What good are reviewers? I think that if something special comes along in a book that's real exciting, the reviewer has a right to make that known to the public. And also to evaluate books that are maybe a little bit different, a little bit out of the way.

CITRO: But what about *bad* reviews then?

WEILGOSH: If it's a real bad book -- I mean if it has no merit at all -- I won't tell anybody about it. I'll let the public find out on their own. I don't believe in publicizing a completely bad book.

CITRO: So you won't give a totally negative review?

WEILGOSH: Right. This is where my sales and marketing experience comes in. People aren't going to believe that a book can possibly be *that* bad, so they're going to go out and buy it. That's going to increase the sales of that book for the author and make money for the publisher. It's a false indicator. When the author's next book comes out people are going to say, okay, the first book *really* was that bad. The author and the publisher are going to ask, "Why didn't this one sell when the first one did?"

Now that may be wrong. That author's second book may be an absolute gem, but the first one was so bad people are not going to give that author a second chance.

CITRO: But all your reviews are positive, at least the 20 or so I've read. Don't you think readers will disagree with you about many of them? Won't that eventually undermine your credibility?

WEILGOSH: A reviewer's credibility will be undermined if he's continuously *negative*. I don't think

readers will question a reviewer who's always positive. I think people in general don't want to be negative, they want to find something good in whatever they're doing or reading or watching. And for a reviewer to be virtually negative on everything, the readers will no longer have faith in that reviewer.

CITRO: What sort of professional qualifications should a reviewer have? I know a lot of writers say a reviewer, at the very least, should have written and sold a couple of novels. What do you think?

WEILGOSH: No, I don't think so. If you're going to be a critic and get into in-depth analysis of a novel, I would think that yes, you should have some experience having some novels published. That's the best way that you're going to know what pain and suffering went into it.

As a reviewer I don't think so. After all, you're not getting into every subtle nuance the author writes, and why he wrote that particular paragraph that way. I don't think that's a reviewer's job. My job as a reviewer is just to evaluate novels as far as how they entertain you, and did you learn anything. That's basically it.

CITRO: Suppose you were teaching a class for reviewers-to-be. How would you describe the ideal review? What should it contain? What should never be included?

WEILGOSH: I think it should contain a little on the author's history. Whether or not he or she is an award winner. Name the award. Possibly mention one or two previous titles. If it's their first novel then mention it's their first novel. Possibly name an upcoming project the author may have going. Your likes and dislikes; a short plot summary.

You've got to pay particular and careful attention to each book. Each book is unique in its own way, with some good and some bad. Basically you have to leave aside your own

feelings and try to understand and share what the author is trying to get across to you and share his or her viewpoint.

You should discuss the interaction of the characters. And also the reviewer should be willing to give a personal judgement of the book. Is it good? Why? Is it not good? Why? You have to make a commitment whether you thought the book was good or bad. And what's good and what's bad about it.

What should never be included is a personal vendetta against any author. Keep that out of print. And also, never give away the ending. Keep the reader in suspense; give them a reason to go out and buy the book.

CITRO: From reading the varying quality of reviews in certain publications, one might conclude that just about anybody can become a reviewer. Aren't there any real standards in the profession?

WEILGOSH: I don't know if there are any formal standards that you have to be this, this, and this. I would think that you have to have some basic knowledge of the field that you're reviewing in. I know that I've been reading science fiction and horror for about 37 or 38 years. I started with the old masters, Asimov, Clark, Bradbury, Heinlein, Simak, back in the early 50s. Other than that I can't think of any real standards.

CITRO: But what about your letter to *Afraid* magazine? You were quite outspoken when you canceled your subscription, saying you were "appalled with some of the reviews..." As I recall, you implied there are standards that *Afraid's* reviewer violated. Care to talk about it?

WEILGOSH: Okay. Two items in particular. One was Mike Baker's review of *Blood Lust* by Ron Dee. He said something like, "If I wasn't getting paid to review it, I would have

put it down." I guess he prostituted himself by doing it only for money and that upset me. And you know, he's not a bad reviewer. I like his reviews and I respect him as a reviewer. But that one particular sentence stuck in my craw.

If a book is that bad and you can't find anything good or decent to say about it, I would not even be bothered with it. Secondly, the review of *Mine* which was done by the editor Tom Elliott. Tom said, the book's flawed because of, "McCammon's unwillingness to lead the reader over into the realm of pure funk, a place where a psychotic might actually hold a baby's head against a lighted stove burner." I have no idea what "pure funk" is and I doubt very much whether Tom can define "pure funk" for me. Be that as it may, I think he missed the point of *Mine*. Mary, in the novel, kidnapped the baby but she never had any intention of hurting the baby. I think that's where Tom missed the entire story.

CITRO: So you felt McCammon and Dee were unfairly criticized. But you know, I suspect that happens all the time. Every writer probably has reviewers he or she would like to hold against a lighted burner. I do. For example, my book *The Unseen* has a strong element of mystery in it and one reviewer gave away the solution to the mystery! I guess the point is, what can a writer do if he or she gets buggered by a reviewer?

WEILGOSH: It's disgraceful that he would do that; I can't make any excuses for him. But what can a writer do? I guess it's to publicize. Let other writers know that this reviewer resorted to this. Also let his boss know, or let the publication know that you're dissatisfied and it's something that never should have been done. These are about the only things you can do.

CITRO: Yup, the writer is pretty defenseless, I guess. But don't you

think a reviewer like Mike Baker or Tom Elliott should be permitted to blunder once in a while? I mean, you once admitted in print (*Pulphouse* #5 review) that if you don't like the cover of a book written by an unfamiliar author you will not buy the book. It would seem that you above all other would know better than to judge a book by its cover.

WEILGOSH: Yeah, you're right. I should be slapped across the knuckles for that. However, this is how I came to that conclusion. I walk into a bookstore and I see seventy books on a shelf in the horror section. Fifteen of them show a child or baby, smiling, with pointed teeth, and a drop of blood dripping from it... Either that or a skeleton! My God, that's been done, and overdone, and underdone. That kind of stuff should have been buried years ago.

Mind you, the story might be good, but the cover, that stinks, and when you've got twenty books with the same cover, you finally say the hell with it.

And when I see a book that says, "In the tradition of Stephen King" it upsets me. I would like to see a book stand on its own merits and a writer stand on his or her own talent. Not everybody can be a Stephen King and not everybody should be. To compare a book and say it's in the tradition of Stephen King, or in the tradition of somebody else, is not giving that author a chance.

I think that's what I was trying to get across. That I do judge a book by its cover and I shouldn't.

CITRO: In the same review you said, "There is an overwhelming glut of novels being published that should never be published." What did you mean?

WEILGOSH: I've got no specific title in mind, but the novels I'm trying to get at are the clones: *Star Wars* or *Star Trek*, the Freddie Krueger clones. That's what I object to. I don't know who the publishers are

appealing to, but no one's going to buy them, I don't think... Talking to some of the bookstore managers around here, they don't sell.

This could have a prohibitive effect; a writer who is talented and who has something different to say might not get published. That's what I'm afraid of.

CITRO: Let's talk about the transformation. I think CD readers have some idea about how one gets established as a fiction writer. But how about as a reviewer? How'd you get started in this reviewing business?

WEILGOSH: What I did was I contacted some of the small press publications like *2 A.M.*, even *Cemetery Dance*, and asked if they were interested in any reviews in the horror, science fiction, or fantasy field. And then I contacted the book publishers to ask if they would be willing to send me copies of books they would like reviewed. Or I asked for books I wanted to review.

CITRO: What made you want to do it?

WEILGOSH: What really started me was that several years ago I was reading a review in David Hartwell's "New York Review of Science Fiction" -- I can't remember the exact title. I read the review and I couldn't understand it! It seemed to be muddled. I didn't know what the reviewer was trying to say. I figured I am an average person of average intelligence -- if I couldn't understand it then there are other people out there who couldn't understand it. So I started writing to the small press publications and the publishers and getting started.

CITRO: Did it take a lot of patience?

WEILGOSH: Patience? Yeah, you get a lot of them that will say no. But most of the time the small press publications were more than helpful and

said, "I'm not interested at the moment but I know this magazine is. Why not give them a call and let them know that I told you..."

CITRO: Lately there has been some discussion about the anonymous reviews that appear in publications like *Publisher's Weekly*. Writers think reviewers should be required to sign their names to reviews, especially bad reviews. What's your feeling about this?

WEILGOSH: Yeah, I think they should. If they're going to make a statement, regardless of what that statement is, he or she should have the guts to stand by what they say and sign their name to the review. If they don't have the parts to stand behind it then they shouldn't be doing it in the first place.

CITRO: Right. Reviewers really have to put themselves on the line. You have no choice but to come right out and name books you like and don't like. Would you be willing to do that now? Tell me three recent releases you really like, and a few you don't like.

WEILGOSH: Yeah, I'll do that right now. Releases I really like? I'll give you four that really stand out in my mind. John Holt's *When We Dead Awaken*. I believe it's his first novel. Exceptionally good novel. Characters were good. Plot line was good and he executed everything well. I was very satisfied with the story. Sean Costello's *Captain Quad* is an excellent novel about a quadriplegic and how he uses his mind. It's an exceptionally good, well done novel. What I found most interesting was the main character lying in bed thinking about playing hockey and growing up much the same way that I did. That struck a familiar chord with me and really made me feel at home when I was reading the book. Dan Simmons's latest, *Summer of Night*, just blew my socks off. An absolutely superb, superior novel.

And another one I particularly enjoyed, some author by the name of Joe Citro, his latest *Dark Twilight*. A rather gaudy green cover, but what the heck. The story itself was exceptionally well done. I liked the characters. I liked the research into the folklore of Vermont. I enjoyed it -- what the heck, it was a good book and I think you should be made aware of it.

CITRO: Thanks, Rich. It's really nice of you to say so. But I can't leave it in the interview. That would be more than normally churlish, even for me. Why don't you tell me about some books you didn't like?

WEILGOSH: I guess one was *Dark Father* by Tom Piccirilli. I had to read it twice and I still didn't understand it. And I didn't appreciate it. I found it was a shallow story. The characters seemed one dimensional and by the second chapter I knew exactly how the book would end. Exactly! And sure enough the author didn't let me down. It was entirely too predictable. It was just another Satanic power story. There was nothing unique about it.

Another one I was very disappointed with was *Firefly* by Piers Anthony. Anthony started out with a good premise, but he didn't seem to take it anywhere; it just went blah. I guess what really turned me off was when he devoted four, five pages to a sexual encounter between a six-year-old girl and an adult. He tried to justify it at the end by saying it was a story about child abuse. That's fine. I welcome that. But does he have to take four, five pages of in-depth sex to make his feeling known on child abuse? No, I don't think so.

And the other one was *Makoto* by Kelley Wilde. I'll tell you first of all what I *did* appreciate was the research he did into Japanese culture. That was good. But that was about the only good part of the book. The book itself just never seemed to get off the ground. It never lived up to the potential. There always seemed

to be hope that it would go somewhere after each chapter, but it just never fulfilled that promise. Also, I had a hard time reading the dialect of the New York people. I'd spend a couple of minutes just pronouncing each word so that I could read what they were saying. So consequently I lost the train of thought of the chapter. That spoiled it for me.

CITRO: You have pretty emphatic opinions about sex and violence in horror novels.

WEILGOSH: If I want to read sex I'll go back and read *Fanny Hill*. I read it when I was 13 and got it out of my system. No, I don't want to read page after page of sex. Everybody knows how it's done and everybody knows that everybody does it. But to go into detail about it, one of two things occurs: either the author has run out of ideas and uses it as a filler, or this is how the author gets off. It helps him get through the night.

As far as violence is concerned, I guess I'm more turned on by a psychological thriller. There's nothing more scary than the human mind that's gone mad. Look at Matheson, Rod Serling, some of the better writers today: they don't have to resort to gore and slash and Freddie Krueger type crap to make a point. Leave something to the reader's imagination; give the reader a little credit for having some intelligence.

CITRO: As a reviewer, what do you aspire to? What are the various indicators of your success? How will you know when you've "made it?"

WEILGOSH: I guess "made it" is the inner feeling you get when other reviewers say that they like your work. Or when you've had authors say, "Hey, I liked your review, thanks. I appreciate you saying that." And you've had people come up and say, "I read your review and I went out and bought the book. You were right, it was a good book."

Another indicator is that you want

to interview me. That's flattering and I appreciate it very much.

CITRO: My pleasure. Before we stop, let's talk about writers again. I know you make it a point to read the works of a lot of beginners. Tell me who you'd like to see readers -- and reviewers -- pay more attention to.

WEILGOSH: There's a lot of up-and-coming authors out there. I'm going to give you a couple that stand out in my mind. They're in no particular order. Two that have made it over the last little while: Nancy Collins and Lisa Cantrell. Both are incredibly talented authors. Their first books are absolute gems and these are two ladies that have tremendously bright futures ahead of them.

Some of the others who stand out in my mind are Jeffrey Sackett, a very talented author. Randall Boyll. Gary Devon has written two marvelous novels and I don't think people are aware of his talent. Rick Hautala is another talented man. Matt Costello, Sean Costello both superb writers. Bentley Little, I think, has a great future as well as Mike Cadnum, His first novel, *Nightlight*, is just a jewel. They all write what they know and I think that's a big plus in their favor.

Another author who has not written a horror novel, but she's working on it is Nancy Holder. I'm looking forward to it eagerly. I've read her short stories in Chet Grant's *Shadows* anthologies.

And how about Chet Williamson? I think he's probably the most underrated writer out there. Read his stuff! He's one of the nicest people you're ever going to meet, and probably one of the most talented and accomplished writers to come along in the last dozen or so years.

CITRO: Good. Thanks, Rich. To close, why don't you tell me what you see as your unique "niche" as a reviewer?

WEILGOSH: I don't know, Joe. I don't know whether I've got a niche. I feel that it's just to introduce people to these non-brand-name authors, to make people aware of their talents. I know what goes into writing. I know the stress and the pain and the heartache that go into producing a good story. And if no one is going to see it or notice it, and make the public aware of it, the writer is going to get frustrated and we're going to lose a lot of good writers. I think that's the main function of reviewers, to introduce and make the public aware of up-and-coming non-brand-name authors. And I think that's my main function or niche as a reviewer.

-- CD



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COMES THE NIGHT WIND, COLD, AND HUNGRY

GENE MICHAEL HIGNEY

GENE MICHAEL HIGNEY has sold short fiction to various publications, including *Dead of Night*, *Owlflight*, *Read Me*, *Alternate Worlds*, and *Bronte Street*. Still a relative newcomer to the terror genre, Higney is a master of creating mood and suspense. The following novella is a throwback to the golden pulp days of horror -- a welcome addition for *Cemetery Dance* readers!

When the doorbell rang, Cal Freeman sighed. It could only be his neighbor and cross in life Selma Huff. Selma had just joined the Jehovah's Witnesses, and Cal seemed to be number one on her converts wish list.

Every evening it was a booklet here, a donation there . . .

He sighed again as he opened the door. The sudden, chill wind gusted against his face, wiping away the only percentage of a friendly smile he could muster.

The sigh caught in his throat like a sharp-edged bone when he saw, outlined from behind by the yellow streetlight . . . a clown.

A clown on his front doorstep. With a painted clown grin that showed more teeth than he remembered clowns usually displaying. Baggy bright drawers . . . red nose . . . wild red hair under a chewed up and holey hat that sprouted a bobbing plastic flower from its brim.

Now, under the big bright lights of a circus tent, a clown might be . . . amusing.

But a clown in the night . . . in the dark . . . the chill wind whipping his ludicrous plastic flower about crazily . . .

Then Cal saw the gleaming arched fingers of the metal garden claw . . .

••

It was the third night of the terror.

No one in Payaso Falls would have believed it could have gone on for *that* long. Just how much time, they asked each other over neighborly cups of coffee, or cold brews, how much time would it take the cops (such as they were in this mosquito-bit-sized town) to find some maniac dressed in a clown suit?

The other question they asked each other was, of course, who was it?

Still not totally rejected was the idea that it could be one of the citizens of Payaso Falls themselves; though

most preferred to think it had to be a stranger, an outsider; some transient who dropped off the train that passed half a mile north of the town.

That was it . . . a stranger . . . *had* to be . . .

Still others thought . . . a transient *clown*? A maniac who was clever enough to glide so easily in and out and around the town, finding people's weak spots, vulnerable points, unguarded entrances . . . well, he couldn't be a *total* stranger.

They only knew he was a clown because old Mrs. Gehrig had "happened" to look out her window at the Wilberses after hearing what she swore were muffled screams, and had seen a rather tall, yes, *clown*, officer, emerge from their home with a bloody knife dripping chocolate syrup colored spots down their driveway.

The part about the screams may or may not have been true; no one else heard them, and everyone knew that Mrs. Gehrig used binoculars to check on the activities of the Wilberses two teenaged kids, whom she hated colorfully.

She would no longer be engaging in that particular pastime, because the entire Wilber family had been found hacked open and spread fairly evenly throughout their living room. As though just before their deaths they had been gathered there to watch some favorite show on television. Only their television was in the family room down the hall. They only used their living room when entertaining guests.

After Mrs. Gehrig's description of the clown, the Sheriff, Devlin Martin, speculated that they had gathered in the living room to watch something else . . . some one else . . . and had been given another kind of show altogether.

Sheriff Martin, heavy-set, salt and pepper-haired, and nobody's coward, had shuddered while Mrs. Gehrig described the clown.

He'd loved to go to the circus when he was a kid. His father, the greatly loved and respected Reverend Howard T. Martin, had taken his family every summer the circus came to town. Sheriff Martin would have taken his own children more often if his job permitted, but it didn't. And now that his wife had left for good and taken the kids with her . . . that was the end of his going to the circus.

Now, it seemed that the circus had come to him.

He couldn't shake the image of the clown, bulbous

nose, baggy pants, striding down the driveway in the light-pocked darkness, knife at his side . . .

Martin swore to himself. They'd get this guy. He'd drafted a few of the feistier guys from Lefty's to help search the town's scuzzier hiding places. Just call them deputies and they're an instant, enthusiastic posse, ready to hunt whatever, Martin had grinned.

In the meantime, he figured, the townies should be safe enough. No one in his right mind would be going out after dark until the killer was caught. But, he thought sardonically, the maniac didn't seem to be waiting for people to come out . . . this clown made private appearances.

**

Freida Rusch had just put on the final coat of a red that would stick in the memory of her nails. She wiggled them tentatively in the air, satisfied with the after-image they left in her eyes. As soon as her red blouse was out of the dryer, she was off. The dishes in the sink could wait until tomorrow. They'd only been there a week. One more day wouldn't hurt. And tonight that new country group was playing at Lefty's. No way she was going to miss that, killer or no killer. Besides, she'd have to be safer in a bar with a ton of people than she was here in this drafty sewer of a house she'd never even wanted, except for her mother died and left it to her. She was trying to sell it . . . but Lord knew there weren't many buyers in Payaso Falls. People were moving out, not in. And she had every intention of being one of the ones on her way out . . .

When her washing machine went on, with its usual clank and buzz that you could hear all the way from the basement to the next county, Freida hoisted herself off the couch, dressed in slacks and brassiere, and clomped down the solid basement steps her father had built with his own two hands.

"What the hell . . . ?" Freida asked several times of no one in particular.

The dryer had gone off. By itself.

Now how long ago had that happened, and what was her red blouse going to look like; probably a wrinkled mess . . . damn.

Her face had never contorted into the particular expression of fright, alarm, and shocked laughter that it suddenly wore when she was confronted by the sight of a capering, squatting, dancing clown.

"Wha—?" was all she could manage as the clown spun a circle, then stopped short, with his left hand extending toward her a bouquet of plastic flowers, his lopsided grin and blinking, different colored eyes begging her wordlessly to smile her approval.

Freida couldn't move.

Not even when the plastic flowers squirted a stream of water into her eyes and face.

Not water . . . she thought as the searing agony exploded through her eyeballs and ate into the nerves behind them, and as her skin wadded up into blisters that popped like crackling chewing gum. Not water . . .

*Clowns are supposed to squirt you with water . . .
. . . And it's not supposed to hurt . . .
She felt her eyes run down her cheeks.*

**

Sheriff Martin looked down at the unrecognizable Freida Rusch. Flash cameras didn't help make the scene less ghastly and otherworldly. He couldn't believe this was really happening. He'd had a few beers with Freida just the other night. She was a sloppy but happy drunk. Inoffensive. The worst thing about Freida Rusch was her housekeeping.

Who would do this to her? Acid . . .

Whoever it was had to be beyond psychotic. Who the hell would think to stuff plastic flowers into the gaping, mushy-fleshed face of his victim?

And arrange them?

**

The coffee was hot, the way he liked it, and Karen was smiling at him, the way he liked. Martin sipped first, then blew, and Karen laughed. Just the way his kids used to laugh when he'd done that for them.

Daddy, you're such a CLOWN . . .

Karen was enough years younger than the Sheriff for him to think of her as a daughter. Sometimes. Other times, he thought of her as she wanted him to, a friend, lover, would-be second wife.

Karen of the chestnut rich hair, and eyes like those of a baby deer. Karen who could have had any of the young men in the town, but who only accepted dates with Sheriff Devlin Martin, whenever he had the time for her.

And who waited patiently for him those times when he hadn't. As in the past four days, since the murders had begun.

Her laughter now warmed away some of the chill that had settled inside him. Whatever new insanities the world brought into being, as long as there were people like Karen to balance it out, it would not tip totally over the edge into some nameless, endless universe of madness.

Martin's father used to describe Hell that way. Maybe he was on to something.

She placed a warmed donut in front of him. He was about to turn it down, thinking of his middle-aged spread in comparison to her youthfully slender figure, when a voice behind him caused them to look away from each other.

"So ya found the son of a bitch yet or what?"

"G'morning, Harley. And how are you this morn-

ing?"

Harley was having none of it. "Don't gimme that crap. I don't find you funny, y'know? Like *some* people do."

Harley planted his bulk two stools away from the Sheriff, in the process actually making Martin look small by comparison. Harley Sheen made good psychological use of his size in his business, which was selling grain and feed, and to win arguments in Lefty's bar on a practically weekly basis.

Martin had had to run Harley a few times when the damage got a little too expensive, and the fighting got a little too raw. Harley hadn't liked waking up in a cell with black eyes given him by the town porker, rather than honestly won in a decent barroom brawl.

The six or seven other people in the cafe heard Harley's question clearly, and while they did not all share Harley's antagonism for Sheriff Martin, they were all undisguisedly interested in the answer.

"We're checking on some leads right now. And every part of town is getting a good going over," Martin replied mildly. "It won't be long now."

"Bullshit," Harley spat.

Karen pressed her lips together, unwilling to trust herself to speak. Harley, with the caginess that comes from long years of awareness of peoples' dislike, noticed her reaction to him.

"Scuse me, Missy. I'm just a plain man and I speak plain. The cops here don't know nothin' about who's doin' these killin's. I know bullshit when I hear it. And I'm hearin' it."

"Well then, do you want some coffee to wash it down?" It was out before Karen could stop herself.

Laughter pealed throughout the cafe, and when Martin joined in the expression of surprise and pleasure, it was worth enduring the venomous gaze Harley was giving her.

"Real funny!" Harley bolted upright with surprising speed for a man of his size. "Whole town's just full of clowns, ain't it?"

The laughter died as quickly as it had begun, and Harley stomped out of the coffee shop, satisfied at the palpable atmosphere of unease he'd left behind him.

Karen's eyes did not meet Martin's again until he said, "Hey, girl. It's okay. He had it coming."

"It's just . . . I hate hearing anybody talk to you like that. You don't deserve it, Dev." Karen wiped the clean counter in front of Martin, as though by doing so she could erase the memory of Harley's voice. And what he'd said.

"He's more right than wrong," Martin said quietly. "We don't know *what* the hell is happening out there."

**

Mindy wore her Care Bears pajamas to bed that

night, even though her older sister Carla had told her they were stupid looking. Carla was doing a lot of mean things lately, even more than she used to do. Mommy said it was because Carla was having Changes inside or something. Well too bad for her. Mindy still didn't like her, and wouldn't forgive her forever for saying that the Care Bears were stupid looking. Mindy loved the Care Bears, and Smurfs, and—

Now what was Carla doing? Last week she'd sneaked out of the house and around the porch to the window outside Mindy's bedroom, and scratched on the glass, just to scare her. Mindy had been real scared too. So scared that Mommy had let her sleep with her and Daddy. And now Carla was doing it again. Only not scratching, but . . . she was out there for sure.

Mindy went to see . . .

Her eyes opened wide with surprise. And delight.

There was a clown outside! A real honest to goodness clown! Right on her very own porch! He was scampering and dancing and twirling and he had a long, long umbrella with colored ribbons hanging off its corners. Funny clown!

Mindy was speechless with excitement.

The clown clambered up on the white railing of the porch, then did a graceful, floppy sort of jump, and landed on the porch without even making a sound.

Funny funny clown.

Then he bowed, looked up right at Mindy, and grinned his lopsided grin. His umbrella closed up tight. Like magic.

And he pointed with its shiny bright point . . . at the front door.

He wanted to come in!

Ecstatic, Mindy hurried out, the flap on her Care Bear pajamas open, to go and let in the funny funny clown . . .

**

The Payaso Falls daily newspaper was using nine out its ten pages to eat Sheriff Devlin Martin alive, or so it seemed.

The phone in the office only stopped ringing when Martin took it off the hook; people were seeing the maniac clown everywhere. If they weren't seeing him, then they had proof positive that they knew who he was. Generally, it was a disliked family member, or a neighbor who had unruly pets. Much of Martin's time was spent explaining that more than a longstanding grudge against another townie was required for him to arrest someone.

Before long, however, he'd become privy to a list of hates and grievances that he'd never known existed, even after living many years of his life in a town where gossip was the main export. Wives were shockingly ready to turn in their husbands, fathers their sons, and a few sons even returned the favor.

What the hell is happening to us? He wondered. It would have broken his father's heart; he'd loved this town. And all he'd ever preached about love and faith was deeply felt and lived. Unlike some of those television preacher-types who talked faith but lived money . . .

His deputy volunteers had succeeded in unearthing two love nests frequented by local teenagers, identified as such by the scattered condoms and beer cans, two terrified hobos of indeterminate age and incredible filth, and nothing else.

The hobos were immediate suspects, naturally, and, as such, were about to be beaten senseless by the deputies, until one of the bums made it clear to them that the other was blind and could not be left alone for any length of time.

When Martin inspected the first hobo, he found arms skinnier than his own wrists, and muscles near nonexistent from years of drinking sterno-and-unknown-substance cocktails. Both the hobos together could not have overpowered Freida Rusch, much less a family of two adults and two teenagers.

Then they found the other families. Slaughtered hideously. While the hobos were being "questioned."

Still, when the hobos were released on Martin's say so, the town council threatened to fire him. There went their easy solution.

Everyone wanted the State Police to be called in. Yesterday.

"I used to think nothing this awful could happen here," Martin whispered to Karen, who was sound asleep next to him. That was when he best opened his heart to someone, he found, when they were asleep and couldn't hear him. He'd done that with his wife, too. Maybe if he had talked to her more when she was awake . . .

Karen shifted slightly, her hair wisping down over her eyes.

"I used to think," Martin continued, after assuring himself that she was still asleep, "that whatever craziness happened out there, it would . . . you know . . . stay out there. In the cities. In the places where crazy people go to lose themselves. Stuff like this doesn't . . . *shouldn't* happen in places like Payaso Falls. I mean, we have our troubles, like everywhere. I've been busy enough what with drunk fights and feuds and speed happy kids . . . but nothing like . . . *this* . . . How do you get a hold of somebody like this? How do you *understand* what's happening inside his brain? He's doing *more* than killing us. He's . . . *infecting* us . . . the bastard's infecting us with the craziness that's happening all over the rest of this country. Kids killing their parents. Mothers killing their own kids. Drugs. But it used to be so far away from us . . . It always used to be somebody *else's* craziness."

He grit his teeth and twisted and wrinkled a hand-ful of sheet, wishing it were the killer's throat.

"But now the bastard's come *here* . . . He's made it our craziness now . . ."

"If I don't get him . . . if I don't stop him . . ."

He started as a hand brushed against his forehead.

Karen was awake. Looking at him with her huge, heart-softening eyes. "You'll find him," she said. She wanted to ask him what he'd meant by "infecting us," but decided it was better he thought her asleep while he'd been talking. So instead, she just repeated, "You'll find him."

"Is that what you really think?" he asked, his arm encircling her shoulder.

"It's what I'm really afraid of," she answered.

..

That night, Mary Lemmings shot her husband Biff dead as he tiptoed into her bedroom. He'd tipped a few with some friends over at Lefty's and thought he'd make it in without the wife knowing, as he had countless times before.

She was waiting for him, as she had countless times before. Only this time, she held on tightly to his shotgun and her excuse. The gun was for Biff, and the excuse was for the cops.

" . . . oh, my God, Sheriff Martin . . . Oh, my God! I thought he was the killer! I thought for sure it was that maniac clown come to get me . . ."

She practiced her excuse (without the benefit of much acting talent) over and over into the wee hours, waiting for Biff. She thought about little else, except the nest egg they'd set aside. And how she and Rolly Lipscomb could finally leave Payaso Falls, where their affair had been a poorly kept secret for more than six months.

She had blown Biff's head pretty much off, and paused only to regard the mess on the curtains and wall.

" . . . oh, my God, Sheriff Martin . . ." she repeated carefully as she edged around Biff's still weakly twitching form and made her way toward the phone. " . . . oh, my God . . ."

"OH, MY GOD!" she screamed in earnest, and quite convincingly, at the grinning clown face in the window next to the phone table.

Backing up in horror, she stumbled once over the extended footrest of her nearly new recliner, and righted herself in time to see the window glide upward.

By itself.

She felt icy air lick her face and ears like an invisible, hungry tongue. ICY AIR? In the summer?

The bastard was trying to get in!

But the clown just stuck his head in briefly, darted a glance toward the bedroom, on the floor of which lay the remains of Biff Lemmings, and then looked back at the stunned Mary, only to give her a pop-eyed, tongue wagging, crazy clown face, and disappear into the darkness.

Mary Lemmings wasn't taking any chances, how-

ever. She ran across the room, heading straight toward the spot on which she'd deposited the shotgun.

When the clown somersaulted through the open bedroom window, she screamed and tried to slow down, but her feet slipped in the splashes of red and grey goo that had been the head of her late husband, and she fell face forward, her head landing on Biff's blood-spattered chest.

She reeled back, dizzy from the impact, and saw the clown caper up and down on her bed, the wild frigid wind fluttering his baggy pants, his tongue lolling in and out of his mouth, and his pop-eyes rolling and gawping independently of one another.

People's eyes don't do that, Mary Lemmings wanted to scream, but she was a practical woman.

She reached for the shotgun instead.

Grasped it by the barrel.

Swung it around.

The clown seemed to stop in mid-air, then drift downward, eyes riveted on Mary and the gun she was even now aiming at his head.

Knowing she had to make this shot count, Mary Lemmings aimed carefully and pulled the trigger.

Practical though she was, she could not think of another thing to do beside scream when the gun made a stupid popping sound and out of the barrel sprang a stick with a cloth sign on it that said: BANG.

After that, all she did was scream.

Because she knew, it was the clown's turn.

••

By the time Payaso Falls's three police cars and one ambulance arrived, the entire street was populated with bathrobed, pajamaed citizens, flashlights bobbing and dancing over each others' curlers and pillow-permed hair.

Sheriff Martin wended his way through the grumbling, frightened, but more curious than either crowd, and into the Lemmings's house.

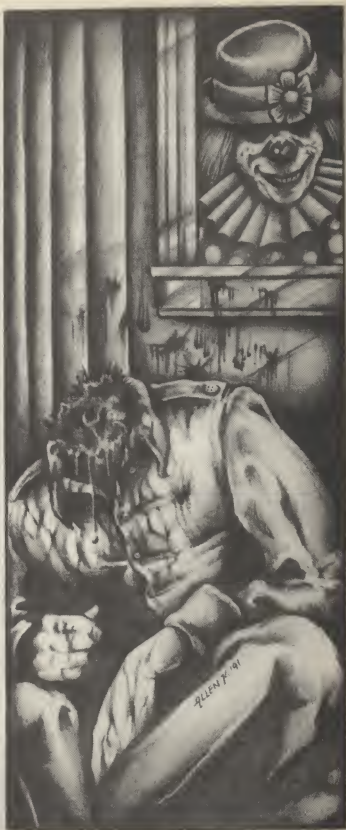
The warmth of Karen's body against his had long since cooled, and Martin felt chilled and alone as he passed by his glaring, or imploring, friends and neighbors and entered the house along with the other officers, and the medics.

He swallowed, hard, when he saw Biff Lemmings's body sprawled across the bedroom floor, the head a memory.

One of the paramedics was throwing up.

It was bad, Martin thought, but not *that* bad. Surely this guy had seen worse than *this* . . .

Martin started to snap at the medic but found that words would not come when he saw that Biff's gaping maw of a neck was not the reason the paramedic was sick.



It was because he'd seen what had become of Mary Lemmings.

This is evil, was all he could think. Pure evil. If there was a Hell . . . this was how it would start.

She'd been propped up between two upright lamps, her arms extended outward, neither foot touching the floor; strung between her right and left hand, dangling down under both her feet, was a length of her own intestine.

She looked like she was jumping rope.

..

Who the hell was swinging on the backyard swing at 4:23 in the goddamned a.m.?

Ben Gifford threw his half of the sheet aside, nearly smacking his wife, Sara, in the jaw. If one of those kids was up again he'd wail the tar out of them, and he didn't care what his old lady said about stepfathers having to be twice as loving. He'd about had his fill of these spoiled brats anyway . . .

He consoled himself with thoughts of what physical violence he could wreak on his stepchildren, until he reached the window where he could easily see the tire swing which suspended on large, creaky chains from a massive old tree in the yard.

It was probably that pain in the ass, Matt. That kid could give Mydol cramps . . .

Ben Gifford squinted to verify his identification of the offending child on the swing.

Instead, he found himself wetting himself.

There was a clown on the swing.

Back and forth he went, the clown . . . the clown, Ben thought wildly, his heart trying its best to explode outward through his chest . . . the clown.

And the creaking swing went to and fro, to and fro, but so slowly . . . so very slowly . . . it didn't look right, it was like slow motion in the movies almost.

A wind seemed to have whipped up during the night; Ben felt its arctic chill through the glass.

But . . . a wind that rustled the leaves of the trees so slowly . . . ? Could that be right? Was he dreaming? That had to be it. A nightmare. Some ugly mistake by his brain.

No. There was no mistake. It was a clown, and his painted weird face was stuck up in the air, like he was drinking in the moonlight, google eyes staring right at Ben, greasy grin all red-tipped and twisty . . .

In and out of the shadows, the creaking swing went to and fro, from moonlight to dark, to and fro . . .

To his subsequent embarrassment, when Sara touched his shoulder, about to ask what he was looking at, Ben Gifford passed out cold.

Too busy trying to revive her husband, Sara didn't look out the window.

Nor did she pay attention to the slow creak of the

swing.

The creaking stopped soon after anyway.

Just about when the freezing wind died away

..

Ben Gifford, happy to be alive, phoned Sheriff Martin and informed him politely and helpfully of what he'd seen in his yard, eliminating only the details about his having wet himself and passed out cold.

He told the Sheriff he was planning to take his vacation early to get the wife and stepkids out of Payaso Falls until the killer was caught. Sheriff Martin was impressed at the tone of concern in Ben's voice when he said he'd rather die than have anything happen to his family.

Old Mrs. Gehrig called Sheriff Martin to tell him she'd seen the clown again through her binoculars, gambling across a neighbor's lawn, and she was certain that he was in reality Jimmy Jalene, that nasty young man with the hot rod that wakes her up nearly every night and exactly when does Sheriff Martin plan to arrest him?

If even a few of the people that Martin talked to were correct, he was dealing with a maniac clown who could be in several places at once. This did not compute.

Sheriff Martin also talked to the Governor himself, and found that he was to "cooperate fully" with the State Police and the Federal agent who was at that moment being flown in to underline the fact that Sheriff Devlin Martin was incompetent and could not even catch a renegade clown.

That's how Martin explained it to Karen when he stopped at the cafe, despite the sensation of every eye being on him, and every mind in town wondering how he had the nerve to stop the mystical act of police investigation for even a moment's rest until the psycho who was decimating the population of Payaso Falls was located and lynched.

He assuaged his feeling of guilt by not having anything to eat, and by committing the further act of penance of not putting any sugar in his coffee.

He just had to see Karen. Needed to see Karen, more than he needed the rest, since he'd been awake and on the go all night long. He needed a friendly face, because everybody else in town, including his own officers could not seem to meet his gaze, and even more than he needed to find the crazed lunatic who was at the bottom of the madness . . . more than his desire to tear apart the devil who had entered his much loved little town, Devlin Martin needed to see his friend. His love.

And she was there for him. Her hand placed over his, gently, cooling his feverish hate and desperation. Her eyes warming the icy loneliness that threatened to freeze solid what was left of his heart.

"My Lord, girl, I want to get the hell out of here."

She smiled. "Say the word, Dev. Just say the word."

For an instant, it sounded like the greatest idea he'd ever had. The greatest idea *anyone* had ever had. Quit. Pack up and leave Payaso Falls for good. Leave it to its own brand of madness. Leave it lay there, vulnerable to the thing that stalked its innocent people.

But *were* they? Innocent?

It didn't matter. He could no more leave his work now, than he could when his wife had given him her ultimatum. *Leave the job or I leave you.*

Even then he could not leave the job. And there had been no horror dressed as a clown back then, no hell-spawned, grease-painted demon gutting the life and happiness out of his community, and his friends . . . well, *once* they were his friends.

Sheriff Martin shook his head ruefully, and Karen nodded. Wordlessly, she poured his coffee, and, still wordlessly, she touched his hand again. He did not drink his coffee, because that would mean moving his hand and ending their contact.

He yearned to take Karen in his arms. Leave with her. *Be* with her. He ached to lose himself inside her gentleness and sanity. When he saw the tears forming in her eyes, he almost matched them with his own. He couldn't allow that.

Instead, he coughed gruffly, stood up abruptly, and said, "I'll see you later, kid. We've got a State search going. They don't think we did it right the first time."

"Say the word, Dev," was all she replied.

When this was all over, he realized with a start, he just might be able to say that word.

**

Calley, the part-time office worker who manned (or WO-manned, as she liked to put it) the office for Payaso Falls's Police Department, radioed Sheriff Martin that Harley Sheen had been involved in another fracas over at Lefty's, this one a little more serious than the other times.

When Martin arrived, Lefty and several other men had cornered Harley with a combination of pool sticks and baseball bats. Harley had contented himself with clutching Rolly Lipscomb hard against his chest, and occasionally taking solid punches at his head, further spreading Rolly's already broken nose across his blood-smear face.

"I've got 'im!" roared Harley when he spotted Martin entering the cool confines of the bar. "I've got the clown!"

"What are you talking about, Harley?" Martin asked calmly. "And quit punching Rolly, will ya?"

"I'm tellin' ya he's the clown! He *tole* me he seen Freida before she got kilt!"

Sheriff Martin leaned over Harley, trying to ignore the pathetic expression in Rolly's eyes. Up-until-now-

handsome Rolly Lipscomb had seen most of the available ladies in town. And quite a few of the ones who were not supposed to be available. Martin happened to know exactly where Rolly had been during two of the nights in question. Making love, not mayhem.

"Let's talk about this," Martin said, and then he punched Harley's lights out.

With a sigh, he motioned for the other men to help him lift Harley and put him in the police car.

**

When he awoke, Harley Sheen's head felt like a train was running at top speed from ear to ear and back. The roaring in his ears, the ache in his jaw, the shadow of the bunk bed over him, the stale concrete smell . . . he knew where he was alright.

And he knew who put him there.

Ducking his head to avoid slamming it against the metal bar of the bunk above, Harley Sheen sat up on the lower bunk that squealed its protest under his weight, and considered just how he might best tear the head off Sheriff Devlin Martin. Just when he'd had that bastard Rolly Lipscomb. Just when he had the maniac in his grasp, that stupid, worthless porker screwed him over.

Rolly all but admitted that he killed Freida. Hadn't he said he'd seen her before she died? That was good enough proof for Harley.

The pig would pay, that was for sure, Harley thought, but first . . . maybe he'd better sleep just a little while. The way his head felt . . .

Harley lay back, nestling his skull into what there was of the flat pillow with the overstarched pillowcase. Then he felt it.

"Shit!" Harley said. "It's fucking freezing in here!"

The bunk overhead squeaked.

Shit, Harley repeated to himself. There's somebody else in here. Sheriff Porker's got some goddamned nerve!

Harley's eyes flew open wide as the thought occurred to him that the person in the upper bunk might be none other than Rolly Lipscomb. What an opportunity!

The springs squealed again as a face flashed over the edge of the upper bunk and looked down at him.

Harley's eyes opened even wider and he screamed in spite of himself when he saw the grinning, upside down, grease-painted clown face, and the eyes that bugged so far out . . . so very goddamned far out . . .

"HI, HARLEY!" said the clown, with a giggle.

**

When Calley came in with the ham sandwich she was supposed to hand to Harley through the bars of the cell, she was all set to hear the usual insults and grossness.

Instead, a definite quiet emanated from the cell,

much to her relief. Harley was probably still out like a light. So much the better. She'd just slip the sandwich through the slot in the bars . . .

That was when she saw that someone had already tried to do the very same thing.

Only they had tried to do it with Harley's entire body.

A great deal of Harley Sheen had been yanked through the unyielding bars of the cell, though there was still quite a bit of him left on the other side, in a matching puddled swamp of blood, bone shards and chunks of twisted, compressed flesh.

"Holy shit," muttered Calley, and she absently took a bite of the sandwich.

Then she fainted.

Harley Sheen had been yanked through the bars of the cell . . . a matching puddled swamp of blood, bone shards and chunks of twisted, compressed flesh.

..

While Sheriff Martin wished to prevent a panic, there was no way he could hold back the horror that gripped his own chest as though Harley Sheen had managed finally to latch onto his heart and squeeze and squeeze . . .

Only Martin, two medics, and Calley had seen the mess that used to be Harley Sheen.

Mostly they had stood together, unusually close together, in fact, and surveyed the hideous damage. They all wanted to say things like: "Who the hell could do something like this?" and "Do you know how strong the bastard would have to be to be able to do this . . . to somebody as big as Harley?" and "We're not even safe in a fucking jail cell!"

But no one said any of these things.

Aloud.

One of the medics was whispering audible prayers. Martin wanted to join him but his mind was numb and he could only remember something he'd been taught by rote, before he could even read or write. It sang through his head in the choppy rhythm of childhood prayers: "Angel of God, my Guardian Dear, to whom God's love commits me here: ever this day be at my side, to light and guard, to rule and guide. Amen."

Any other time, he would've mocked the idea of such a prayer. Now, Martin shuddered. Maybe prayer was all they had left.

The door behind them opened. They all started, and turned around quickly. Martin had his gun unholstered in a flash, which did little more than impress and upset the others, because it was only Doctor Medina from the hospital Payaso Falls shared with two other nearby small towns.

The doctor raised his arms in mock surrender and said wryly, "This is why doctors don't make housecalls anymore."

..

" . . . pushed him halfway through the goddamned bars!" Martin hissed. Karen held him closer. Closer still.

"First I thought he got *pulled* through. But Doctor Medina said *pushed*."

Karen shuddered. She understood the significance of the word. "Pushed" meant, among other things, that the killer had to have been *in the cell with Harley*.

They had not moved in fifteen minutes from the tiny hallway that led into Karen's apartment; actually the back part of an old house redone after World War II to house a son who never returned. Karen had tried to coax Martin in, but he'd insisted he could only stay a moment. He had to get back out to supervise what was amounting to a major evacuation of Payaso Falls.

Nothing official was happening, of course, but a great many of the citizens decided, after hearing the rumors initiated by Calley's story of what she'd seen and heard in the jailhouse, that this would be the ideal time to visit relatives and friends in another town.

The one main road that connected Payaso Falls with the major highway, and thence the outside world, was busy; the town emptying out what there was of its population.

State police supervised. More confusion was caused by the incoming people than by the outgoing; TV crews from local stations, squads of deputized volunteers from nearby towns, intent on flushing out the maniac, and general out-of-town gawkers hoping to get a glimpse of one of the death houses, or, better still, an actual gory victim.

The Federal Agent did little more than talk on the phone to unknown listeners, and Sheriff Martin had grown tired of the name-calling and threats.

He needed Karen.

Again, she was there for him.

"I don't know what the hell I'm up against," he whispered sourly into her sweet-smelling hair.

"What *we're* up against," she corrected.

He held her away at arm's length, probing her eyes with his. "I want you to leave, Karen. Pack up some stuff and go and stay over at--"

"Forget it."

He knew she'd say that.

"I'm serious. I can't be out there hunting down some God knows what while I'm worrying out of my mind about you being here all alone."

She knew he'd say that.

"I'm . . . scared for you, Karen. I love you." He said it with barely enough air to give it volume, but she heard it anyway. He'd meant her to hear it. No matter what it cost, he didn't want to go back to talking to someone who was asleep. You never knew when you'd next see the person. Or if. Better to say what's in your heart and take the chances on their response.

"I love you too, Dev. Don't ever doubt that. I love you just the way you are, and I'll love you that way forever if you want."

He had no idea she would say that.

"After tonight," he whispered, "after tonight I'm . . . we're outta here. I'm through. It's bigger than what I can fight. I . . . I can't fight insanity, Karen."

"Let me come with you tonight."

He knew she'd suggest that. And she knew he'd say no.

They both knew she'd end up doing as he asked.

He waited while she packed a valise, and he saw her to her car, checked its back seat while she waited, hugging herself against a biting cold wind that had suddenly arisen, and, assured that it was safe, helped her in.

They kissed for what seemed like an hour; nowhere long enough.

"I'll call you from the hotel in San Luis."

"I'll be there as soon as I can."

He hated like hell to see her pull away toward the main road out of town.

He'd have hated it even more if he'd seen what was in her trunk.

**

As he drove through the dark, deserted streets of Payaso Falls, he had to fight the sense of unreality that threatened to render everything that had happened little more than the remnants of better forgotten nightmares.

This couldn't happen here. He kept saying it as though the sentiment was original with him. Gradually, the abandoned houses, with a few brave exceptions, convinced him that, indeed, the madness and evil that seemed like a vague, incomprehensible force out there in the cruel world had invaded Payaso Falls in a very personal, corporal form. An indiscriminate, coldly, brutally evil *something* had singled out this town for slaughter and destruction, and the turning of neighbor against neighbor, family member against family member. And was succeeding.

Almost worse than the cold-blooded killing, was

the chilling effect the murderer's presence was having on people who used to live with one another in more or less harmony.

It may be that there was no power on earth that could stop a thing that could do . . . what this maniac had been capable of. Never very big on the supernatural, Martin now had to admit that the presence of the clown . . . God that sounded stupid . . . but the presence of the clown was a fairly convincing argument that *some* force other than the human kind was at work.

How had he gotten into that cell with Harley?

How had he gotten out?

Past Calley? No window? No way.

Hardheaded reality be damned; there was *something* out there. And if you called it supernatural, then that's what the hell it was. Might as well call it like it is and figure out what the hell to do about it.

It stood to reason, as far as Martin could tell, his thoughts as dark as the streets he now patrolled, that only another force, equally supernatural, could combat the invader.

But what force could *that* be?

Nothing presented itself to Martin's mind until he passed the white clapboard church in what was good naturedly referred to as Payaso Falls's downtown area.

He slowed the cruiser to a near standstill, and gazed up at the steeple, in which hung the first bell from the first church ever built in Payaso Falls, some hundred and something years ago.

Church? God? Oh, boy.

Be reasonable.

Okay. He tried. He didn't like what came out of his mental computer. If there was something out there . . . something . . . *evil* . . . which seemed fairly evident, might it not stand to reason that there was good as well?

His father had believed.

Where was his father's faith now that *he* needed it?

Why did it always seem to Martin like evil was so much stronger than good?

Maybe evil was easier to summon up than good?

Maybe it was easier to lose faith than to get it?

The church looked so picturesque pretty and peaceful. How could something that pretty and gentle hope to compete with the thing that shredded Harley Sheen and gutted the Wilbereses and Freida Rusch, and--

And why was he wasting his time thinking about philosophy or religion or whatever the hell else you'd call it?

Martin was about to dismiss the thought of the supernatural altogether, and start all over on the basis of the escaped maniac theory, because it was the only idea that wouldn't make him sound like an ass when he made out his final reports . . . before he resigned . . . when--

He felt the blast of wind and the cruiser's wheel shuddered under his hands.

He shivered. Cold? Now?

As though a voice had called him from above, Martin looked up.

The bell in the steeple began to swing.

The wind gusted again. Stronger. The bell advanced.

Slowly. Soundlessly.

And against the direction of the wind.

Sheriff Martin knew the church was empty. He had seen Reverend Ogilvie and his family leave Payaso Falls early that very day. No one was supposed to be in that church.

Slowly the huge bell rocked forward. Then backward.

Martin waited for the bell's deep toll, but no sound came.

Still the bell arced farther out. Then back.

In silence.

The wind was strong . . . but there was no way to explain it's movement against the wind unless . . .

There was someone up there moving that heavy, ancient bell back and forth, back and--

Someone was clowning around. Even as he thought the stupid expression, Martin regretted it.

He parked the cruiser, wincing as the fierce air slapped his collar up into his face so it stung with pain and cold.

That was when he saw him.

The clown astride the bell.

His baggy pants flapping and sounding like applauding hands in the winds. His grease-painted face glowing against the black black night, his toothy, red-smudged smile reaching ear to ear as though able to open wide enough to swallow the town whole.

The bell floated forward under the weight of the clown, who straddled it with a gleeful, ecstatic abandon that chilled Martin's blood worse than the icy wind.

I've got you, you son of a bitch, was all Martin could think as he raced forward, gun drawn, eyes squinting against the painful, searing blasts of air.

I've got you now, he repeated, as he kicked his way into the church and ran down a side aisle toward the steeple entrance, his boot heels clattering like machine gun fire into the dark stillness of the church.

He forgot to call for backup.

..

When the tire went flat, it did so without the loud gunshot pop that would have made Karen jump and gasp. Instead, the successive, resounding slams sounded like someone was beating on the top of the car with an iron fist.

Karen kept a firm hold on the steering wheel though it jiggled roughly under her grip.

Front tire, passenger side, she decided, as she pulled the car to the side of the road.

Wouldn't you just know it.

Of course here.

Of course now.

The old side road to San Luis was a typical shortcut: deserted and dark, and seldom used because there was nothing in San Luis that wasn't in Payaso Falls so who needed to go there?

Karen set the parking brake, and got out of the car.

Circling quickly, she went to check the tire.

Just a delay, she instructed her prickly nerves.

Change it and be on your way, girl. Let's not act like a Friday The Thirteenth movie victim.

She stared down at the betraying tire.

Her heart pounded. Harder. Her eyes rebelled and went out of focus. Her breathing wouldn't start up, and she thought there was a good chance she'd pass out.

She shook her head and looked again.

No, it was still there.

The little clown face sticker. The kind you put on a kid's homework papers for a reward. It was right there on her hubcap, grinning at her obscenely. Next to the jagged piece of metal that had imbedded itself deep into the tire.

Deep enough to let the air out a little at a time, as she was driving . . .

She kicked the clown in annoyance.

Of course it kept on grinning. What else would it do?

Hugging herself against a cold that was not outside her, Karen hurried around the side of the car to the back.

To open the trunk.

..

He half expected the clown to have disappeared by the time he arrived in the bell tower.

No such luck.

Martin threw the door to the steeple open with such force, that it slammed and recoiled back at him. He stopped it with his elbow and found himself not ten feet away from the grinning lunatic.

This close, he could see the rolling eyes, the lolling, wagging tongue, and something else. Something that told Martin all he'd ever believed about the safe sure laws of the visible universe was dead wrong.

If the clown had been an oven, Martin would have been burned to a cinder. But instead of searing heat, what emanated from the very person of the maniac before him was a cold so intense, so scalding, that Martin had to fight the temptation to reach up and feel his face to see if there was any skin left there.

Behind the clown, the giant bell swung upwards, almost sideways, its thick clapper striking its side with no effect whatsoever. Silence. Dead ice silence. The quiet of a glacier in a midnight arctic sea.

He was lost in an ocean of cold and silence. Alone

with the creature in garish paint and hideous eyes.

Only the wind is screaming, Martin thought wildly.

"You will be too, in a minute," said the grinning clown.

..

"Damn," Karen muttered, when she had to double back to the driver's seat and get the keys. "Can't open the trunk without the key, bright girl," she berated herself out loud, hoping the sound of her own voice would drive back that dark . . . that reaching, grabbing cold that was scrambling at her clothes, her hair, her eyes . . . but her frightened, almost whining voice did little to comfort her.

She thought about Devlin Martin. How much she loved him. How good things would be there for them both once they'd left Payaso Falls.

She put the key in the trunk's lock.

..

As the clown's grin stretched wide, wider, and his googling eyes rolled apart and together again, the wind blasted like grains of freezing sand into Martin's eyes. He fought to keep upright, leaning into the blazing cold and forcing himself to ignore the agony it cost him to raise his gun and point it at the clown.

Reflected, suddenly, horribly, in the clown's eyes, as if done deliberately to throw Martin over the brink into despair, Martin was certain he saw . . . Karen. Alone also in the windwhipped light, reaching to open a door which would somehow unleash the waiting, other side of the clown . . . the side that revealed himself as he really was. The hideous extension of the freak before him that in some inexplicable way enabled it to be in two places at once.

Two places at once . . . *Karen . . .*

The striking, dead silent bell, howled a message at Martin, an important message, if he could only . . .

The silent bell. Choked into silence like that stiffening, dying faith that it represented.

Dying faith. Jesus God, he thought, is that it?

The clown squealed with an ear-splitting screech of victory.

And Martin knew without doubt that he was looking at a horror that was not human and never had been. An evil that so delighted in its own misshapen malice that it was an affront to sanity and goodness, hope and faith--

Faith.

Even as his gun went off again and again, Martin knew it would do nothing to the thing that stood before him in the mocking shape of a clown.

Martin stopped doubting even before the first bullet struck the chest of the clown and was instantly transformed into a polka dot on its rag-tag shirt.

Another bullet. Another polka dot. The clown cackled dementedly.

Martin would have laughed had his face not been near frozen with fear.

The clapper struck the church bell yet again.

Soundlessly.

As soundless and affectless as had been Martin's belief, just an instant before, in pure supernatural evil. And good.

Martin lowered the gun as the clown drifted toward him, its ragged-gloved hands reaching, reaching with too many fingers.

"I know what you are," Martin said quietly into the shrieking wind. "And I know how to stop you."

And against his own hard-come-by reasons, against his own stubborn rebelliousness toward his father's calm and assured faith in a God of goodness, against all his carefully accumulated doubts and despairs, Martin forced himself to say the words into the devil's breath of wind, into the approaching, hellishly mocking face of the madness of the universe:

"Angel of God," Martin recited, "my Guardian Dear . . ."

It did not matter to Martin that the gloves encircled his throat and the hungry wind tore raw red needle-width strips of skin from his face, nor that his voice sounded as it had when his father knelt beside him at night while he recited the words that once reflected what he'd believed as a little child.

Back when he'd known and not doubted the truth.

"The Lord is my Shepard . . ." said Martin. And at that instant, staring into the face of evil . . . he believed it again.

The deafening thunderclap of sound coincided with the intake of Martin's breath.

The majestic gong of the church bell pealed like the voice of all the thunder that had ever sounded over the face of the earth.

This time the clown's scream was one of agony, and Martin, released from the thing's grip, fell backward, his head feeling as though it had been struck by the very bell that now tolled as if it would shake down the church beneath it.

"Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death," he whispered. "I will fear no evil . . ."

The clown's face sagged inward and then bubbled outward, stretching, changing colors at the same time as its body erupted with countless squirming wormlike pustules, each with a mouth that screamed hollowly and then writhed inward on itself to resolve into the shape of a thing so alien, so maddening, that Martin closed his eyes and felt hot tears course down his raw cheeks.

The clown-facade was no more; in its place was the disgorged unspeakable living detritus of hell, the asylum of the universe.

Its eternally hungry and insatiate mouths, its blind

malevolent eyes, its scrabbling, pincered, chittering legs rimmed with erupting sores born of nameless, hell begotten diseases . . .

Again the lightburst thunderclap of the bell's music, faith given voice given sound given might; and the obscene thing before Martin exploded into uncountable fragments of darkness that spattered the black night sky and then were swept swirling and screeching away on the last vanishing gusts of the freezing, hungry wind.

The bell tolled once more, and its rich, bottomless voice sang over the silent town, settling finally into a hushed, steady, soothing tone that lay over everything like the memory of a cool gentle rain.

Shakily, Martin rose from where he'd fallen, the warm night air caressing his aching face as he knew Karen's hands would when next they were together.

He started down the stairway from the bell tower, the sound of the bell, the sound of lost faith and hope recovered, only a memory now. But a memory he knew he would take with him forever.

..

Karen had ignored the inexplicable fear she'd suddenly had about opening the trunk. Stupid, really, and it had just lasted for an instant. She'd imagined the clown

leaping up at her out of the car trunk. Then, angry with herself for being such a baby, she flipped open the trunk just as the church bells in Payaso Falls sounded out across the night.

Naturally, there was nothing in her trunk except what was supposed to be there.

It was somehow quite soothing to hear that beautiful old bell, tolling away while she replaced her flat tire with the spare and then prepared to head off to San Luis.

It seemed as though she hadn't heard it in a long time, now that she thought about it.

Maybe, she thought hopefully, it's a signal that everything is okay in town. Maybe they'd all be able to go back in the morning and everything would be . . . well, maybe not the *same* again, but at least . . . back to normal.

As she drove away, she found herself saying a prayer for Martin's safety.

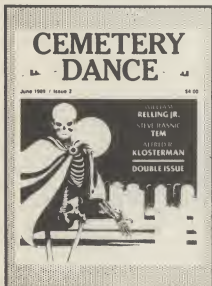
She knew it had been answered when his police cruiser came up behind her just outside San Luis.

They held each other for a very long time, and then turned around and headed back to Payaso Falls.

Back home.

Martin had so much to tell Karen, and he would not be waiting for her to fall asleep anymore before doing so.

-- CD



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I feel like a teenager when I say it, like some pathetic, pimple-faced punk with booze on his breath and leather on his back, bitching at his parents about their lack of empathy. But just like that teenager, I mean it when I say that no one understands me. No one that I know, anyway. I'm sure there are others out there just like me, and I wish I could meet them. It's terrible to feel like this, like I'm the only one. But I know I'm not the only one. History tells me that much. There are other people like me in the world.

When I was ten years old, my father was convicted of mass murder. He had been arrested, so the police didn't come to the house. Well, they *did*, but it was only to ask us a lot of questions about a bunch of different times on different dates and that sort of thing. We didn't see the actual arrest until it came on the news later. By then the cops were already at our place, looking us over and asking their slyly suspicious questions.

We didn't know anything. Oh, we knew a little, like the blood Mom kept finding on my father's clothes and the lies he kept telling her about it. He told her he had some friends from work who kept a herd of steers to sell for beef. He said they were too squeamish to do the actual killing of any steers and had asked him to help out. Having been raised on a hog farm, my father had said no problem -- or so he told my mother when she asked about the blood.

Later, when we learned that my father had used a small hatchet on his victims, my mother sold our washer and dryer. She couldn't bear to look at or even touch the controls, knowing the blood of over a dozen innocent people had been washed out and dried in our basement.

We sold a lot of stuff after my father was arrested. After the cops went through the place looking for evidence, we sold just about everything my father had even breathed on. Except for his clothes. My mother said clothes were too personal, that they carried too much of a person with the sweat and the smells and the faded worn places. It was best to burn his clothes, she said. It would be like burning him.

Something about that sounded slightly voodoo-ish to me, but we weren't even Baptists, let alone believers in some strange herbal religion from the islands. We were just a working Mom and her kid, trying to deal with what had become a waking nightmare. We burned the clothes out in the country and covered the ashes with a pile of rocks, making it into something of a ritual in spite of ourselves. Afterward we drove back to the city and found the neighbor lady just leaving our front porch. Rather than stop and wait when she saw us, she tucked her head and hurried across the drive toward her own home.

My mother told me to hold on, but I beat her out of the car and up the porch steps to the door, where there was a white, rolled-up piece of paper stuck inside the door handle.

"Wait," my mother said as I began to unroll it, but I ignored her. The paper held a message from six of our neighbors and was signed by all of them. It said they knew we weren't responsible for what my father had done, but just the same they would feel better if we downplayed the press and allowed the neighborhood to get back to normal as soon as possible. They also felt it was best if I didn't play with their children for a while. Their children were upset and frightened and having nightmares. Playing with me would only make things worse.

I cried for an hour after reading that note. My mother held me and rocked me and soothed me as best she could. Then she got mad. She called each neighbor and told them it was fine if they wanted to take out their fear and disgust on her, but to punish me for having a murderer for a father was as bad as anything her husband had done.

A month later we moved. Mom couldn't afford to keep buying new tires, since the ones on the Pontiac kept getting slashed every night. Terrible things were written on our house and sidewalk, and one time we even found a huge bag of human feces on our porch. It was a joke usually played by teenagers, but there were no teenagers in our neighborhood at that time, and Mom recognized the sack as one she had seen the neighbor lady carry home from a certain store the week before. It had a red rose on the side.

Moving was best, Mom said. She didn't have the energy to keep fighting our neighbors' ignorance. We moved across town to a decent neighborhood and lived there for six months without a problem. Then my father's

trial came up, and the press returned to roost around us. Our new neighbors suddenly wised up to who we were, and once more our house became the target of vandals. Worse, I became the target of other kids. They called me names, took turns beating me up, and one slaving sicko somehow got half a dead dog into my lunch pail. I stopped eating lunch after that.

Mom stopped eating period. Soon she grew ill and had to stay home. It was psychological, her doctor said. The details of the trial had reached her ears, and the heinousness of her husband's crimes, the extent of his insanity, was eating her up inside. She couldn't believe she had let the monster touch her, kiss her, sleep with her. My God, she had even given birth to his *child*.

When she started looking at me funny, kind of watchful like, it broke my heart. I begged her not to stare at me like that and I told her I was like *her*, not *him*. But she was too sick to hear me. She couldn't trust her own judgement anymore. She was suspicious of everyone and everything. Even me.

Before the trial was over my mother was admitted to the state hospital and put under suicide watch. I was sent to an emergency foster home, and then to a more permanent foster home. The last time I saw my mother was when the woman I lived with agreed to take me to see her for a visit. The trial was over by then, and I was happy to tell my mother that the jury had convicted my father and the judge had sentenced him to the electric chair.

My mother beamed at me so sweetly. She took my hand and rubbed it against her face and said, "That's good. That's really good. How are you, honey? I miss you so. You're looking well. Oh, how I love you. I love you so much."

I hugged her back hard and cried. It was my mother again. She was back. "I love you, too," I said. "Please try to get well so you can come home."

"I will, sweetie," she promised. "I will."

That same afternoon she received a letter from my father, written in prison. The next day she jumped out a second floor window and broke her neck. An hour later she died.

Last week I received that letter in the mail. I don't know how it found me, since my name was changed when my foster family adopted me, but it was the same letter my mother read before she tried to kill herself. The note accompanying the letter said merely that the anonymous sender had found it and thought I should have it after these fifteen years.

It took me a while to open it. For a few days I looked at it, held it in my hands, and more than once I considered making a fire and tossing it in without even looking at it; burn it as we had burned my father's clothes that day and cover the ashes with more rocks. But I couldn't. My curiosity was relentless.

When I finally opened the letter I was surprised at

its brevity. There were only a few scrawled lines. They read:

To my lovely wife:

I did it for you and the boy. To prove my worth to you. If not for you, I'd be just another man. You have made me immortal.

Love, your doting husband.

I let the letter fall from my fingers to the floor as I imagined my tortured mother's eyes lingering over those few accusatory words. I ground the paper under my heel as I left the room and prepared to don my uniform. Once at work I saw the faded scrawl over and over again in my mind. The guilt my mother must have felt. The agony she must've put herself through in those last hours of her life, knowing that over a dozen people had lost their lives in the most brutal way imaginable because of some distorted impression the monster she had married wished to make.

At the prison I checked in with my superiors and made a few jokes with my co-workers while waiting for the appointed hour of my father's death. It would be today, on the anniversary of my mother's death, that he would die. After fifteen years worth of appeals, psychiatric studies, and calls to the governor, the judge's sentence of execution would finally be carried out.

He hasn't seen me, doesn't know his son is employed by the penal system, or that I will be in attendance at his execution. I'm saving that for the last moment, when he peers through the slit I made in his hood and sees me pull the switch that will end his existence. I volunteered for switch duty, something no one understood. My request made everyone look at me strangely, like my mother did that day. I don't mind. Father will understand, I'm sure.

— CD



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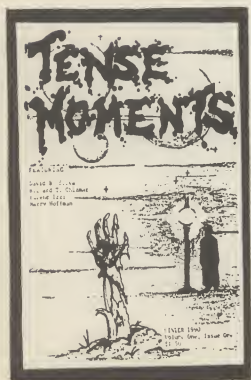
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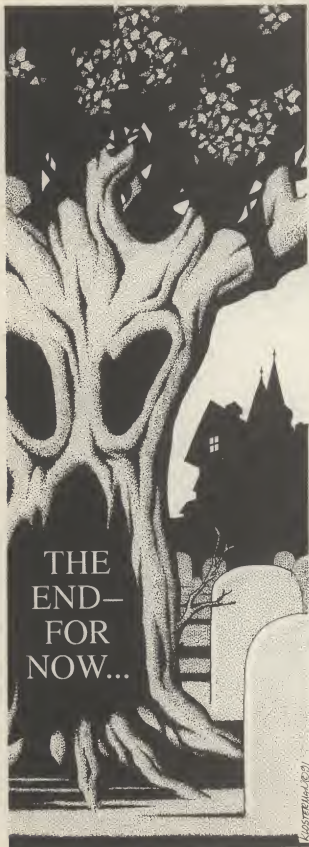
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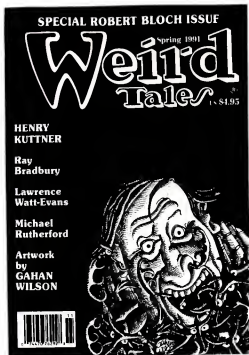
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